

Faraway Dreams

Solitary Confinement

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Summary

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Description:

Lindblum has always been a city where dreams are born. However, one young Burmecian is forced to watch as his dreams are plagued by bandits, mercenaries, and nightmares of the future.
[Complete]

Preface

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Enjoy...

:Faraway Dreams:

Preface:

When Final Fantasy IX was in production, the release of the Playstation 2 was within two years of being released. Square knew that this newest addition to the Final Fantasy line would be the last on the Playstation, so they decided to try something rather new. The previous Final Fantasy titles, VII and VIII, were both set in worlds where dark technology and fantasy collided in a truly unique way. This newest Fantasy, IX, would be a sort of rebirth of the classic fantasy world that the original

three Final Fantasy titles brought to us a decade earlier. In the end, it was released and brought us into a massive world filled with magic, depth, and dreams.

This Final Fantasy is one of my favorites out of the series. It drew me back into that dreamy world of fantasy that the first three games instilled, only with beautiful details and music that the originals couldn't produce. What intrigued me the most was the introduction of demi-humans like the Burmecians, hippos, dogs, and others, whereas the only other major species in previous games were dwarves and moogles. This opened up an opportunity to create a history for each species of demi-human, most of all, the Burmecians and their dragon knights.

This story isn't about the history of Burmecians or dragon knights, though, but on the struggles of their people, or rather just one of person alone in a new city with only his dreams to motivate him.

Are we strangers in this place,

looking for a place unknown.

We're just leaning on the breeze,

saying you'd like to give it up.

Can we find the truth behind us,

when the long journey ends?

Are we wrapped in mysteries,

walking down the winding roads.

Can we find the reason why we love

on this walk of trials?

—*The Breeze, Final Fantasy III*

Part One, Introduction and Chapter One

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Enjoy...

:Faraway Dreams:

Introduction:

Lindblum was big, no argument about it. Anyone who was even kilometers away from it could easily see the top of the castle looming over the horizon like a manmade mountain. You would be walking towards it, constantly looking up at the massive size of the city, feeling smaller with each step you took towards it. By the time you arrived at the main entrance, Hunter's Gate, after walking up flight after flight of stairs from the ground to the bottom of the

castle, you felt like a grain of sand in a child's sandcastle. From an airship, the metaphor was almost a fact, people scurrying about their business below you like tiny ants under a giant's gaze. Once you were through Hunter's gate and stepped into the main Business Avenue, you'd really start to feel small and tiny compared to this vertical city. Buildings were literally stacked on one another, rising into the sky and clinging to the walls with pathways strewn about in all sorts of places. Next, you'd realize that despite all this open air, it is filled with swarms of airships of all conceivable designs. From common Transit taxis to massive Freighter airships, the air was just as crowded as the city, and in the middle of all this stood a castle that imposed on the city like a statue in a town square. You wouldn't be able to help but gawk at the size of it, the castle rising into the sky with only the Lindblum Airship Docks coming close to rivaling it. You just can't escape that feeling of insignificance with all these massive achievements of man standing before you, and once again you fall to that metaphor of being a grain of sand in a sandcastle.

I felt the same way when I first came here, and it took some deep thought and friendly advice from others to see it as a good thing. That proverbial

sandcastle may be beautiful and intricate in design, but it still is nothing but individual grains of sand like you and me together with everyone else in this place. Despite all that philosophical talk, though, this city still deserves the title of Lindblum Grand Castle.

Part One: On Dreamscapes And Despair

Chapter One:

Fedrich Castor couldn't stop staring up at Lindblum Castle, no matter what he tried to think about. The burman could hardly walk a step without stopping to gaze at the massive castle before him, bathed in the dying sunlight of the evening. In Burmecia, he walked in open lanes of travel, and saw a castle that seemed a part of the mountains itself. Lindblum, on the other hand, looked like a massive wart on the surface of Gaia, an artificial structure that wanted to contest the skills of the Gods themselves.

"How am I ever gonna find a way around here?" Fedrich asked himself, adjusting his hat against pointed ears.

He looked around the area, a large walkways leading to the base of the castle surrounded by

hundreds of stores and carts selling their wares. Standing near a large statue of some important figure was a soldier of Lindblum, the man standing out in his white uniform and large, pointed helmet. Fedrich decided to ask him for directions to an Inn, hoping to get some rest after half a day of walking. He strode through the busy crowds to the soldier, his long strides closing the distance quickly. The soldier looked across at the approaching burman with a curious stare, causing Fedrich some discomfort.

I suppose I do stand out in a crowd of humans. They must not get many people from Burmecia here...

“Can I help you?” The soldier asked Fedrich once he was within earshot.

“I just arrived here from Burmecia, and I was hoping that you could tell me if there are any Inns nearby.”

The soldier grinned and pointed to a location behind him. “There’s a bunch of Inns on the main street further down. The closest one’s on the right just a minute’s walk, it’s called Lavilero’s.”

“Thank you very much.” Fedrich nodded.

“Anything else you need helpin’ with?”

“No, I’m fine for now. Thanks again.”

“Alright then, have a good stay in Lindblum!”

“I will!”

Fedrich stepped away from the soldier and continued deeper into the city, amazed at the number of shops and cart selling everything imaginable while keeping an eye out for Lavilero’s Inn. He shifted his shoulders around, adjusting the heavy pack he carried with clothing, supplies, one abused short sword, and his modest sum of Gil.

I hope that this Lavilero is willing to accept a long term guest at a reasonable price. I’m not even sure how long 1,400 Gil can last a person here...

After a minute of easy walking, he looked to his right and saw a wooden sign proudly proclaiming the entrance to ‘Lavilero’s Inn, luxury accommodations for the common man’. Fedrich’s clawed feet immediately started to ache, as if knowing a chance to relax and sleep was at hand. He stepped inside and walked to the front desk, a smallish man with a thick mustache sitting and reading a large book. The man looked up at Fedrich, his eyes wide with surprise to have a burman in his Inn.

“Rooms are eighty Gil a night.” The man rumbled.

“I’m planning to be here a while, are there any discounts for staying a week or more?”

The man’s expression darkened. “Rooms are eighty Gil a night, no exceptions, so a week comes to five hundred ’n sixty Gil. You still want it?”

Fedrich leaned his head back in thought, then nodded and drew out his pouch of Gil and fished out the payment for the night. The man pulled the coins into his hand and into a hidden spot below the counter, then reached back and plucked a key from a small board of them.

“Room seven, third floor.” He recited from the key’s tag.

Fedrich reached for the key, but the man drew it back and caught his eyes. “Don’t lose it.”

“I won’t.” Fedrich swallowed, uneasy at the man’s attitude.

The man gave Fedrich the key, and the burman turned and ascended the stairs to the third and top floor, finding his room nearly at the foot of the staircase. He shoved the key in and turned it, a loud

click unlocking the handle. Fedrich opened the door and was presented with a room less than what he expected. A bed with thin sheets was stuck in a corner, a small table was in the center of the room with a single chair, and a rickety looking dresser was set opposite the door. Above him was a solitary lamp, fueled by an electrical connection that shone a dim yellow light into the room, revealing sad blue walls and a single window drawn shut.

“This is luxury?” Fedrich asked the room, getting no response.

With a sigh, he slung his pack onto the ground next to the bed, setting the key onto the table and sitting on the bare chair. He pulled the pack open and set his foodstuffs onto the table, mostly bottled water and dried meat. He pulled the short sword out of the pack, then drew a small portion of the blade free of the sheath.

This sword has seen far too much action to be of any use now. I used it a few times myself, but my father put it through so many skirmishes as a soldier that it's practically worthless...

He put the blade back in place, then tossed it onto the bed and continued unpacking. He opened the dresser and put his spare sets of clothes into the

drawers, then set his hygienic materials on the top. Afterwards, he took his empty pack and tossed it next to his bed, gathering his pouch of Gil and securing it in one of the pockets on his belt. He picked up the Inn key and left his room, locking the door and putting it into another pocket.

Can't sleep on an empty stomach!

Fedrich walked back down the stairs and found the man at the desk back to reading.

"Know any places to eat?" He asked.

"Across the street. Farrels." The man replied without lifting his eyes from the book.

"Thanks." The burman muttered.

Fedrich exited the Inn and walked across the avenue, and true to the Inn worker's word, there was a small cafe nestled between two shops in a dimly lit lamppost. He pushed the door open, and revealed a small eatery full of a collection of different people. Older men were sitting at the counter, a mother was trying to keep her three kids quiet, and a group of young men were playing cards on a table near the door with a waitress chatting alongside them. Fedrich walked to the counter and sat at one of the

open stools, and a kitchen worker stepped up to his place.

“What’ll ya have?” The man asked.

The burman looked up at the menu posted, and he was quickly overwhelmed with a selection of meals he hadn’t ever seen. In regards to drinks, however, he did spy a few that he had at home.

“I’ll just have some black ale for now, please.”

The worker gave Fedrich a strange look. “How old’re you, kid?”

“Nineteen...” Fedrich replied, curious.

“Sorry, just had ‘ta ask ’cause the soldiers dun appreciate lettin’ youngsters drink the heavy stuff.”

“That’s understandable.”

“Right, I’ll be sec.”

The man went to the bar and picked up a mug from the rack, giving it a good cleaning and drying with a wet rag. He then put the mug under a tap and poured in some dark looking syrup, then filled the rest with an amber liquid and gave the drink a stir with a small glass rod. He set the mud in front of Fedrich, brought out a small tablet and listed the

single ale, then went to the other customers at the counter. Fedrich picked the mug up and took a swig of the ale, and proceeded to stifle a cough as it burned down his throat.

Goddesses! This stuff is a lot more potent than the ale at home!

Fedrich finally coughed slightly, then looked back up at the menu to try and find something that looked like it would be edible. Listed were all kinds of sandwiches, soups, and meats that weren't at all like the meals he had at home.

There are so many different kinds of food here, it's almost too much to believe. Burmecia always had a small selection of foods, but it was enough to sate our appetites. I suppose it's to be expected, this place does specialize in having things from all over Gaia...

“You made up yer mind?” A voice asked.

The burman looked back down to see the same aproned worker in front of him.

“Eh, what would you recommend? I'm new to Lindblum...” Fedrich admitted.

The worker grinned slightly. “I’d go for the fish ’n krakka lettuce, goes good with spicy drinks.”

“Okay, I’ll have that.”

“Right. It’ll be a few minutes ’til it cooked.”

The worker wrote in the order on his tablet, then stepped into the kitchen and barked out the order before going back to his post at the counter. Fedrich again went back to his thoughts, specifically his plans for the next few weeks.

Well, at least I have a weeks worth of bed at the Inn. Food won’t be too much a problem, and I can always buy dried meat to stretch my money a little more. The problem right now it going to be finding someone who’ll buy my fathers sword for more than petty change, I can’t hope to improve my skill with a dull thing like that. I also gotta get a lot of medicine for training, and find a doctor if I get hurt badly. So much needs to be done, and I already spend a third of my Gil just for boarding! I pray to Rei that scavenging monster hides can at least break me even...

“Fish ’n krakka platter!” A chef announced from the kitchen.

Fedrich snapped out of his thoughts, seeing the counter worker pick up the platter and present it to him.

“Enjoy.”

“I will.” Fedrich replied, utensils in hand.

Fedrich unlocked the door to his room and walked in, feeling pleasantly full after his meal.

“He was right, that meal and ale went good together, and the twenty five Gil cost was quite a bargain, too.”

The burman took his pouch of Gil and tossed it on the table along with the room key, then went to the dresser and changed into his night clothes. He stretched out his arm and legs, then sat on the bed, which didn’t offer much comfort. Taking the used sword and leaning it against his pack, Fedrich went to the light and closed its shutters, blotting out the yellow light to a dim glow. He then went to the bed and slid into the sheets, resting his head against the flat pillow and closing his eyes to a fitful sleep.

* * *

Fedrich found himself in front of a massive castle, looking into a window, a young human girl

staring at the skies. He looked around, and saw that he was hovering in the sky without any support. He was shocked, but the scene changed before he could react to the unnatural situation. After a second, he was facing a stage that looked like it was floating on an airship, actors running around and two young men dueling in front of the crowds drawing cheers and whistles. The next change revealed the blonde boy in disguise, talking to a young girl dressed in a white healers robe. Fedrich was getting confused, wondering what kind of bizarre dream he was having.

This is no ordinary dream, Fedrich

“Who is it!?” Fedrich demanded of his dreamscape, seeing no one around.

I am unimportant, look

Fedrich looked back to the scene, seeing it changed once again to show a large airship fleeing a massive city, smoke pouring from its backside and fires spewing from windows and cracks in the hull. The scene changed, showing the same airship crashed into a forest, a young blonde man racing towards it.

“What is this supposed to be?” Fedrich asked.

This is a scene from the future, an incident on the outskirts of Alexandria

“Alexandria? What does it have to do with me?”

Look again

The scene showed the same blonde man in combat, daggers drawn and alongside a knight in silver armor. A plantlike beast was attacking them, a small boy in a pointed trapped in its vines and casting fire from his hands. A change, and this time the blonde boy, the mage, the knight now holding a young girl, and a taller boy with patched skin were running from monsters made of plants. The patched skin boy threw something as the monsters caught him, and the blonde caught it and escaped the forest as it turned to stone.

“What kind of dream is this? Why is this quartet so important?”

What you look at is the promise of the future, the saviors of our planet

“What!? Saviors of Gaia? How absurd!”

There is more

The scene changed again, showing the foursome walking through the mist covered plains below

Alexandria. Faster it changed, showing them traversing a cave of icy winds. The blonde boy fighting a winged mage and a massive serpent monster. The four walking into a village with hopes to rest. The small mage being captured by two adults. The blonde boy and young girl descending into the earth and finding a secret cave. A massive machine producing mages. The blonde boy, girl, and small mage fighting a taller mage with two large wings. The four of them boarding an airship. A third winged mage causing havoc on the airship with fierce magic. A pursuit that traversed through south gate, the winged mage's craft exploding and damaging the south gate.

“This... t-this is utterly bizarre...”

Bizarre it may appear, but this is the future of these four Saviors of Gaia

“You say they are saviors, but are they going to save us from?” Fedrich asked.

At first, they will save the three great kingdoms from destruction, then our own Gaia, and finally all of existence as we understand it

Fedrich was stunned at the revelation, hardly able to comprehend the vast information being fed to

him.

“That cannot be possible! What mortal danger can be so great as to threaten the existence of our world!?”

You will understand all in time, young Fedrich, but heed the warnings you have seen and prepare for the conflicts to come

“What do you mean?”

Beware the princess’ sixteenth birthday, for that will signal the start of this tragedy

“What princess? The princess of Alexandria!?”

The dreamscape didn’t answer, angering the burman.

“Come back, phantom speaker! Answer my questions! Are you there!?”

The voice didn’t respond, and Fedrich cursed under his breath and looked at the scene. It showed the quartet maneuvering the airship through the Falcon’s Gate of Lindblum, entering the massive city and heading for the castle. The scene blacked out, leaving Fedrich hovering alone in his dreamscape. Suddenly, an image of a brilliant gem flashed into

his view, painful light emanating from it and starry chaos swirling around it.

Fedrich shot upright from his sleep, sweat matting his fur and his green eyes wide in shock. He pushed himself out of bed and walked to the table, picking up a canteen of water and taking several swigs of the cool liquid. He capped the container and sat it on the table, resting his hands on it as he reflected on the mysterious dream.

What kind of danger could come to this world? Why would this... phantom... tell me, out of all the other important people who could stop this? And what was that gem I saw before I woke?

Chapter Two

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Enjoy...

:Faraway Dreams:

Chapter Two:

Fedrich woke up to the sound of footsteps clunking up and down the staircase near his room. He rose from his bed slowly, cracking his knuckles and yawning after his uneasy rest, then moved to pull the drapes of the small window open. Moderate light poured into the darkened room, the sun blocked by the massive walls of the city, but still able to send light to the avenue below. People were already up and working, leaving Fedrich to wonder if the city ever truly slept.

“Might as well get going.” He muttered.

Opening the dresser drawers, he shed his sleeping clothes for his normal attire. He slipped into his moss green workers pants, taking his supply of dried meat and placing it into the numerous pockets on them. A similar colored vest came next, checking that he still had a few medicinal vials secure for use. He snapped on two beaded necklaces, one holding a large, serrated tooth given to him from his grandfather as a family heirloom. A large brimmed hat finished his appearance, a yellow Chocobo feather sticking out from the leather material. Fedrich grabbed the faded strap on his sword’s scabbard, slung the loop across his shoulders to lay across his back, then struck out for the markets to start buying his needed items.

Fedrich stepped out of the Inn and added to the growing number of people starting their day in Lindblum. He then began his search further into the city, remembering that he didn’t see any medicine shops or weapons dealers near Hunter’s Gate. After several minutes of fruitless search, he passed under a large arch decorated with several colored flags and banners and entered into a massive open air market. Hundreds if not thousands of people were milling about, talking to one another and creating a din that

nearly overwhelmed Fedrich's sensitive ears. Trying to block out the sound, he dove into the crowds looking for any sign that would point out a shop he needed.

This place is exactly like the Daines Market in Burmecia! Too many people and too much noise, but there was always something worth buying in the mass of vendors. Perhaps I'll have similar luck...

Fedrich pushed through a knot of shoppers, finally stopping to ask someone if they knew where he could get his items.

“Excuse me,” He asked a elderly man behind a table of knickknacks. “But do you know where I can find a medicine shop or a weapons dealer?”

“Eh? Speak up, boy!” The man requested, leaning forward.

“I’d like to know where I can find a medicine shop or—” He repeated in a louder voice.

“Medicine! Stop by Miss Alice’s shop and you’ll find every herb and potion you could dream of!”

“Where is her shop?”

“Just head thataway!” He pointed, gnarled finger leading to a small street at the edge of the market.

“Thank you very much!” Fedrich thanked, heading towards the street.

“You need any candle snuffers or doorknob polish!?” The elderly man asked, waving his hands across his goods.

“Eh... maybe later!” The burman offered, continuing to walk.

Fedrich maneuvered through the remainder of the marketplace crowds until they eased up at the entrance of the street the old man pointed out. He walked down the significantly quieter pathway, the street opening up to a small square with a water fountain at its center. Mainly homes occupied the area, but Fedrich smiled when he saw the familiar sword and shield picture up a flight of stairs. Left of the weapons shop, he spied a sign marked as ‘Alice’s Potion Stop’, and further left down a small alley was a sign of a blacksmith’s synthesis shop.

Rei’s blessing, everything I need in a convenient location!

Fedrich first entered Alice’s shop, and was presented with rows of food, medicine, and all sorts of foreign ingredients.

“Can I help you?” A honey blonde haired lady asked from behind a counter.

“Actually, I was looking for some potions and some antidotes.”

“We’ve got plenty of those, just against the wall to your left!” She chirped.

“Thank you.”

Fedrich went to the specified wall and found the items resting on a table, each separated into different spaces with prices listen on colored tags. Small, finger sized vials of a bluish liquid were marked as potions, priced for twenty gil. Antidotes were in a similar sized, square vial, but colored an unnatrually bright green and marked for sale at fifteen gil.

Okay, I'll need to save about 500 Gil for a good sword, so that leaves me with... 315 Gil leftover. I suppose six, no seven potions will do for 140 Gil, and four antidotes make another sixty... a grand total of 200.

Fedrich picked up the number of potions and antidotes he wanted, then presented them all to the woman at the counter so she could count them out and make a price. She checked their prices, then

scribbled down some numbers into a dog-eared recording book.

“Okay, the total comes to 200 Gil!”

Fedrich pulled out his pouch of Gil, lighter from his spending, and pulled out two one hundred Gil pieces to give to the woman. She took them eagerly and put them below her counter with a smile.

“Thank for your purchase!”

“You’re welcome.”

Fedrich gathered up the potions and placed them into his vest pockets, then sliding the antidotes into a pouch on his pant’s belt. With a tip of his hat, he bid the woman a good day and left for the weapons dealer.

The weapons shop was as he expected. Armor, swords, maces, lances, staffs, and every conceivable weapon developed were displayed against the walls and floor, leaving a small path to the counter a large, brutish looking demi-human occupied. Fedrich looked all around the shop, feeling suddenly embarrassed to be holding a poorly maintained weapon in the face of glittering blades and polished armor suits. However, he swallowed his pride and walked to the counter, the demi-human finally

looking up at the burman with a neutral expression in his furry face.

“You need something?” The man spoke, voice deep and throaty.

“I need to trade in this old sword for a new one like it. Can you help me?”

“Well, let’s take a look at your blade.” The demi-human began, standing to an impressive height a head taller than the burman.

Fedrich slung the scabbard from his shoulders and presented it to the man.

“Pretty old scabbard, but definitely Burmecian Knight issue.” The demi-human commented, pulling the blade free of the sheath. “Oh my! This is definitely something!”

“Hmm?”

The man pushed the blade near Fedrich’s eyes. “Here, take a look. See this pattern near the base of the blade? This is an old crest of the Burmecian Royal Guard, but they were disbanded a few years after the Cleyran separation group left the court. The Burmecian king ordered a highly trained group of knights to take a pilgrimage to the southern cliffs

beyond the Daines-Horse basin, deep into the Aerbs Mountains. Three years afterwards, they returned as Dragon Knights, and they have been responsible for the protection of the King and the Royal Court since.”

“And?” Fedrich asked, curious.

“Don’t you see? Dragon Knights use lances and spears as their weapons, so no sword would bear the markings of a royal guard unless it was from before their time! Your sword here could be well over one hundred years old!”

Fedrich’s thin tail went rigid, finally connecting the information.

Who on Gaia would think this rusty blade would be from such a long begone era!? It’s no wonder why it looks so old and abused...

“So, what can you give me for it?”

“Normally this would be worth tens of thousands to the right man, but the poor thing’s been badly treated, so it’d never sell for that much.”

“But will you still take it?”

“Well,” The demi-human pondered. “I’ve been selling and collecting weapons for a long time, and

this'd really add to it. The wear looks mostly external, so I suppose a little spit 'n polish would clear it up. Does, say... 2400 sound fair?"

Fedrich almost pulled a double take, but he recovered with a smile. "Fair, that's more than I ever hoped! You got a deal!"

The demi-human smiled widely and put the blade back into its scabbard, then hung it on a rack with a few other swords. He then reached for a large chest and pulled it out, rooting through it with thick hands to pull out mass numbers of coins. After a minute of fishing through, he finally presented Fedrich with three five hundred Gil pieces and nine one hundred Gil pieces.

"Okay, here's the Gil. You also wanted a sword like this one to replace it, right?"

"Yes."

"Well, I've got a few swords hanging around from Burmecia, so they should be pretty close to the same one you had. Just a sec, I'll get them."

The demi-human walked around his shop, pulling random blades free of the racks they rested on and sliding them in front of Fedrich to look at. Four

blades later, he finally plodded back to speak with the burman.

“Alright, these are the four I have. Most of them are around twenty years old or younger, so they’ll be good for display or use in battle, whichever you prefer.”

“Okay.”

Fedrich picked up the various blades, looking at them for any kind of fault and giving them a few experimental swings. After checking them to the extent of what he knew, he finally looked at the worker with a questioning expression.

“Which one would you recommend? They all feel the same to me.”

The demi-human chuckled a bit. “All of them are for use by the Burmecian Knights, so it’s to be expected.” He picked up one of the blades and look at it. “This one is the youngest of the four, just twelve years old from forging. Blades are usually in better condition in the first few years, so any kind of fault can be fixed to make it stronger. I got it two years ago from some young burman not unlike yourself. It surprised me that a kid like him would have a knight’s sword at his age...”

“So how much would you want to part with it?”

“Normally a burman made blade would sell for decent money, this one for around 2000 Gil, but since you sold me that rare blade, I’ll give you a discount and make it 1900. Fair?”

“More than fair.” Fedrich smiled, pushing 1900 Gil back to the worker.

“Okay, here you go.”

The worker have Fedrich the blade, sheathing it in its dark leather scabbard and strap. Fedrich took the strap and slung it about his shoulders, the cool leather feeling familiar to his back. He then gathered the 600 Gil leftover and dropped it into his pouch, leaving him with almost the same amount of Gil as he had when arriving in Lindblum.

“Thank you very much for the sword and the sale, Mr...”

“Dragoos, kid. Be sure to come back here if you need any other weapons or armor!”

“I’ll be sure to remember that.” Fedrich thanked with a nod.

The burman exited the weapons shop and struck out down the street and back into the market, the

noise even louder as more people were flooding in to buy and sell. He pushed through thicker crowds, ignoring the shouts of the vendors as they tried to make their wares the most desirable to those nearby. After a bit of tricky walking, he finally broke out of the crowd and started back down the main avenue of the business district. He stopped at a small stand and bought two oranges for his breakfast meal, knowing he's need something in his stomach if he actually got into a battle.

I only hope whatever fights I get into aren't beyond my skill. Father gave me many lessons with short swords so I could properly attack and defend myself in a fight, but will it be enough?

After several minutes of walking, he finally passed through Hunter's Gate, walked down the pathway to the solid ground below, and finally exited Lindblum, the limitless plains of the plateau before Fedrich's eyes. The forms of two mountains were to either of his sides. Beyond them were open forests to his left, and the vine choked wetlands named the Pinnacle Rocks were to his right.

“Alright!” Fedrich declared aloud, stepping off the paved path and onto the unguarded, open land. “Time to put this blade to use!”

* * *

Fedrich plopped onto a small rock, uncorking his canteen and taking a long drink of the tepid water. Putting it back onto his belt, he took out some of the dried meat with him and took a bite for a disappointing lunch.

This is getting me nowhere. I've been looking all over the base of these mountains for nearly five hours, and nothing has happened at all! I know that the Lindblum Plateau is home to some dangerous monsters, and that they can be fiercely territorial to intruders, but do they come for me? No, they just hide away...

His ears perked up a moment when a faint sound rose to the air, his teeth no longer chewing and all his attention focused on sound. For a few seconds, he heard nothing, but the sound of a high pitched scream raced through the air and caught his attention. Fedrich pocketed the meat and stood, scanning the horizon for any sign of the voice. A different sign appeared as an arrow whistled near his head and sank into the dirt close to his feet.

“What the-!?” He blurted, looking at the arrow.

The arrow was almost buried completely in the dirt, but enough of the shaft and the quiver were above ground to show signs as to where it came from. Fedrich looked behind him, and he guessed the arrow had come over the small vein of rock at the base of the mountain he searched. Acting quickly, he broke into a run for the rocks. Crouching low, he used his leg's strength to propel him into the air, landing near the top of the stony obstacle. Scrambling to the top, he looked over and saw a battle much larger than he expected in progress. Three humans, all armed with different weapons, were fighting off a horde of enormous arachnids that were lashing out with equally large mandibles. One arachnid near his position flailed about, screeching in pain as an arrow embedded itself into its abdomen. However, the hit wasn't enough to kill the monster, and it scrabbled to its legs and started towards it's oppressor. The archer drew another arrow into a longbow and fired, the metal tipped projectile hitting the arachnid's leg without much effect.

Come on! This is the chance you've been waiting for! Go!

Fedrich pushed his fears aside and drew his sword out, the grip firm in his hand and the blade's

weight ready to be used in action. He climbed up to the top of the rocks and jumped into the winds, aiming for the arachnid as it stood its place and tried to hit the archer with wild abandon. He began his fall, bringing his sword back as his path would take him to the side of the monster. With a mighty swing, his momentum from the fall included, his blade cut clean through the leg of the arachnid and into its midsection, drawing yet another gargled screech from the beast. The archer, using the distraction as cover, strung another arrow and fired into the beast's head, killing it. Fedrich looked up from the kill at the archer he assisted, and was surprised to see it was a young, redheaded woman.

“Who’re you!?” She demanded.

“Behind you!” Fedrich shouted, seeing another arachnid approaching from behind.

The woman looked back at the enemy, and she quickly ducked and rolled to her side, avoiding a potentially lethal blow to the head. With fast motions, she drew and fired an arrow into the underbelly of the arachnid, the creature lurching up as its insides were pierced. Fedrich, fast to follow, ran forward and dodged the creature’s limbs, then

plunged his sword deep into its head and assisted in yet another kill.

The woman got to her feet and drew another arrow. “What are you doing here!? This is dangerous work!”

“Dangerous work is what I’m looking for!” He declared proudly.

“Well, stay out of our way!” She ordered, tensing her longbow for use.

She looked to her side and fired, the arrow flying across the ground and impaling itself into a final arachnid, doing her part of the fight as the other two warriors present finished it off. Fedrich looked around the battlefield, seeing nearly a dozen corpses of arachnids lying around in various poses of death.

“Alright you two! Let’s get these things cleaned out and head home!” A commanding voice shouted.

The young woman kneeled in front of the arachnid Fedrich killed, pulling out a small dagger and cutting at the corpse.

“What are you doing?” The burman asked.

“What does it look like?” She replied, holding up a set of wicked looking fangs. “Carve spider fangs

contain venom, and chemists pay well to get these and make antidotes from them.”

“Really?”

“You didn’t know that?”

“No...”

The young woman sighed audibly, putting the fangs into a thick pouch at her hip. “Well, what did you think we’d do with these corpses? Carry them back home?”

“This is the first time I’ve been out scavenging! How could’ve I known?”

“You could have stopped at a hide shop to find out.”

“Hide shop?” Fedrich repeated.

The woman laughed at his confusion. “Gods, you don’t know anything about scavenging, do you?”

“Who’re you talking to, Ruthy?” Another female voice arose.

“Just some idiot who thinks he’s a scavenger.” She shouted back.

“Hey! I know that I’ve got a lot to learn, but that’s no need to—”

A sudden pain lanced up his back, and he fell forwards onto the sparse grass as a booted foot lowered itself from a kick. He rolled onto his back, and he quickly used his short sword to block a strike from a much longer one wielded by a woman in black clothes. He forced all his effort into his arm to hold the sword back, but the woman drew it away and held her hand out to stop him from countering.

“Well, the kid’s at least got skill enough to keep his defense up,” She commented to the air. “So he’s no wannabe hunter.”

“And he did help me get rid of two of those spiders.” Ruthy admitted.

“More like saved you from them based on what I saw.”

“Ah, sis...” Ruthy droned. “I was doing fine.”

“Sis?” Fedrich stated. “You’re sisters?”

“Yeah. Your point?” The sword-wielding woman asked.

Fedrich looked between the two women. Ruthy, obviously the younger of the two, bore red hair in

two braids and brown eyes. The elder woman had black hair and brown eyes, and looked much taller and intimidating than her younger sibling.

“Well, you don’t look alike...” He observed.

“Illis takes after our father strongly, and I, my mother.” Ruthy explained.

“Oh...”

“Come on, get yourself up, kid.” Illis ordered, offering a gloved hand to the burman.

“My name’s Fedrich.” He corrected.

Fedrich accepted, and he was lifted up and stood nearly eye to eye with the dark clothed Illis. The woman sheathed her blade, then gave Fedrich a looking over with her cold eyes.

“So, you trying to make a living killing monsters?”

“Well, yes. I came here to participate in the Festival of the Hunt, so hunting monsters for Gil seems like a good idea to practice for it.”

“Isn’t it.” She muttered, looking behind her. “Hey Gerick! Get over here! We got someone for you to see!”

“What? You can’t mean—”

“Hey, if the kid wants to join, then he’s free to try. At least he actually has some skill unlike some of the trash that stopped by.”

“Join? Join what?” Fedrich asked.

After a few seconds, a large man with a massive battle hammer stepped into the conversation. He stood even taller than Fedrich, his bearded face locked in a perpetual smile as he stepped up to the burman.

“So what’s this I hear about someone to see? Is it you?”

Fedrich was immediately nervous, the man’s voice carrying an air of authority and command. “Eh... my name’s Fedrich, Fedrich Castor, sir.”

“Ack! Don’t go callin’ me sir, I’ve been outta that business for years. What’re you doing out here, anyway?”

“I... came to Lindblum just yesterday to start training for the Festival of the Hunt. I was planning to find a place to rent, and to go scavenging to make ends meet and practice at the same time. I came out

here looking for some monsters, and I stumbled onto your fight by accident.”

“Ah, the dream of every young man lookin’ to make his name in the Festival. Tell me, though, what kinda training you’ve taken for this.”

“Well, the past year, before I left home in Burmecia, I practiced with my father, one of the Knights for the kingdom. I left three days ago on foot and made it here yesterday evening.”

“Fight any beasts on the way?”

“Just a few imps and a fang or two.”

“Well then...” Gerick pondered, stroking his chin. “Illis, you got anything against taking in a trainee?”

“Not really.”

“And you, Ruthy?”

The redhead looked over Fedrich, then gave an idle smirk. “I guess there’s nothing wrong with it.”

“Alright, it’s agreed!” Gerick announced, putting fist to hand. “Welcome to the Regulators, Fedrich.”

“What, you mean that you’re an organization?”

“Hell yeah, we’re the ones who go out and keep the monsters from runnin’ rampant around the cities! Each major city in Lindblum has a Regulator team in addition to their guards, so the army ain’t busy with monster trouble.”

Fedrich’s eyes lit up.

Not only I meet some new people who can help me prepare for the Festival, I also got myself a job doing just that!

“Thank you very much for this chance!” He thanked.

“Don’t thank me, kid. You’ve got the spirit for it, and that got you the position.” He looked to the other women. “Alright ladies, let’s get home ’n give Fedrich here a proper introduction to the others.”

Chapter Three

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Enjoy...

:Faraway Dreams:

Chapter Three:

Gerick kicked open the door to the Hide shop in an alley off the business avenue, drawing the attention of a large, tattooed man at the counter.

“Back from the hunt already, Gerick?”

“Yeah, and I got more than just spider fangs this time ’round.”

The two women entered the shop with Fedrich just behind, the burman looking around at the shop

like a child. The tattooed man looked at him with a surprised eye, then held back a laugh.

“And how! Takin’ to hiring children to work for you?”

“Fedrich here’s hardly a kid. He’s got skill, just needs to learn how to use it!” Gerick laughed. “Soon he’ll be the one draggin’ in the spoils of combat instead of me! Fedrich, meet my ’ol buddy Corban!”

Fedrich tilted his hat in respect to the elder man. “Nice to meet you.”

The tattooed man laughed again. “And formal, too! You’re really lookin’ ta improve your image, eh?”

“Nah, he’s just a good hearted kid.”

“Okay, so watcha got for sale this time?”

“Just eleven carve spider fangs and an goblin dagger. They must’ve been fighting each other in the mountains before comin’ down to the plains.”

“Okay, that’ll be 880 Gil for the eleven fangs, and one hundred for that dagger.”

“Sounds good.”

Gerick set the fangs and the curved imp's dagger onto the table, and the tattooed man reached for a pouch at his side and pulled out the appropriate Gil as payment. Gerick gave the man thanks and the four left the shop, coins in hand.

“Okay, each of us get about 320 Gil raw, so it’s 160 Gil after deductions all around.”

Gerick divided the proper coins for Illis and Ruthy, then put his share and the rest into a pouch at his side and walked out towards the main avenue. The four walked towards Hunter’s Gate, but turned and entered a station filled with people and small Airships.

“What’s this place?” Fedrich asked aloud.

“This is a Transit station for the Aircabs.” Ruthy answered. “The Aircabs take people to the different districts in the city day in and day out so they don’t have to walk. It’s a necessity to move around here quickly.”

“What district are we going to?”

“We’re heading for the Theater District where the Hall is. That’s where we conduct meetings and practice our skills.”

“Plus we’ll introduce you to Gordan and Macky.” Illis added. “Then give you a real test to see if you’re good enough to work with us.”

“What kind of a test?” Fedrich pressed.

Illis smiled wickedly. “You’ll see.”

Fedrich sighed inwardly, wondering what the dark clothed woman was hiding from him. He continued following the three Regulators as they wove their way through the moderate crowds. Apparently set on catching a certain Aircab, they rushed past other people and made their way to the front lines. An Aircab flew into the station, engines pivoting to slow the blue painted craft as it settled into a pathway to direct it’s movement. The doors slid open, and the four jumped inside and took seats in the cabin next to one another.

“Now departing for Theater Station.” The operator called through the cabin, voice hoarse and neutral.

The engines whirred to life, the craft lifting into the air as the power reached it’s maximum. Then with a tilt forward, the Aircab flew down the painted track of the station and into open air. The craft shuddered as the winds buffered it around, causing

no panic to the experienced operator. He pulled the controls back, and the Aircab gained altitude and rose up towards the higher elevated Theater District. After a slow minute of ascending, the Aircab leveled off and flew into another station similar to the one in the Business district. Decelerating and letting the engines wind down, the Aircab settled onto the ground and opened its doors to the passengers. Everyone departed, leaving Fedrich and the three Regulators alone in the sparsely populated station.

“Gods, I’m starving.” Ruthy piped up. “I wonder if Gordan made anything for our return?”

“Perhaps, and hopefully it’ll be edible this time ‘round!” Gerick laughed.

“It’s not my fault he can’t follow the recipes I gave him.” Illis sighed. “I blame it on his spoiled childhood, never having to cook for himself...”

“It’s still early. I don’t think we’ll croak if we have to wait for a meal.” Gerick stated.

“I just might.” Ruthy snickered, looking back for Fedrich and seeing the burman rather stiff. “Hey Fedrich, lost your voice?”

Illis looked back at him. “He looks pale even under his fur. Tell me, did the little guy get scared in

the Aircab?”

“Well...” Fedrich stammered. “I suppose... an amount of fright got to me... seeing that I’ve never flown through the skies before. So... yes!”

Illis laughed slightly. “And here he thinks to be Regulator material.”

“Aw, come off it, sis. I think you’ve teased him enough for the day, already.” Ruthy pleaded jokingly.

“Fine. I might as well save it for the test.” Illis smirked.

“Okay ladies, let’s get to the Hall before we waste anymore daylight!”

The four of them left the station and entered the walkways that threaded along the buildings, passing various staircases heading up and down to reach homes or shops elsewhere. After ten minutes of walking, they ascended a staircase that followed a curve in the side of the building it was against, and then finally came up to the front of a small square. Two other staircases ran into the open area, and a few children were running around in the dying afternoon sunlight.

“Welcome to the Hall.” Gerick announced.

Fedrich looked at the building Gerick motioned to, a wide structure with large windows and two doors propped open to the cool air. Leaning against one of the doors was a man dressed in clothes hardly meant for a warrior, but rather a nobleman. The man looked at them through black hair framing his face, then stood upright and tugged the cuffs of his pressed white shirt straight.

“I was wondering when you would come.” The man questioned. “Normally you would have returned a little earlier than this.”

“Sorry ’bout that, we were just taking our time. Besides, we’ve got us a new trainee.” Gerick motioned to Fedrich. “This is Fedrich Castor.”

“A pleasure to meet your acquaintance.” The man said with a light bow. “My name is Gordan Fulmen.”

“Nice to meet you, too.” Fedrich replied.

“Has he been formally introduced into the Regulators, yet?” Gordan asked.

“Naw, we were bringin’ him here to do just that. You up for doin’ it?”

“I suppose so, since my attempts at cooking failed miserably once again. Is he with weapon?”

“I am.” Fedrich answered, motioning to the hilt of his sword.

“Then may I use your sword, Illis?” He asked.

“Sure.” She agreed, taking her sword by the scabbard and tossing it at the well dressed man.

Gordan caught it with a single hand, then drew out the sword and set the scabbard against the door and stepped into the open square. The few children present quickly skipped to the edges of the square, chatting to one another as a few people stopped to glance at the setting.

“The trial of a Regulator is one of utter severity.” Gerick quoted from his head, walking to the edge of the square with the two other women. “The battlefield knows no mercy, nor does it recognize right from wrong or good from evil. As such, a Regulator must be ready to lose his life in this terrible place, for the battlefield won’t stop an enemy from taking it. Hesitation to kill is as good as being killed, and no morals or rules of combat will prevent it. Do you, Fedrich Castor, pledge to fight

this trial with all your soul and heart, and fight every battle after with the same?”

“By the Goddess Rei, I swear on it.” Fedrich declared, voice deep and serious.

“Gordan Fulmen, do you swear to this as well?”

“Indeed I do.” He agreed.

“As this is a trial between comrades, and is not a matter of life and death, it is agreed that the trial will stop when first blood is drawn. Now, each of you draw your weapon, and let this trial commence!” Gerick commanded.

Gordan immediately went on the offensive, sword up and ready to strike. Fedrich pulled his sword free of its sheath with barely enough time to block the first blow of the trial. Gordan drew back and again lashed out, colliding into Fedrich’s blade with a piercing shriek of metal. Fedrich, hoping to catch the stronger man off guard, leapt into the sky to avoid a third swing by his opponent. Landing near the edge of the square, Fedrich started forward with his sword in front of him, and he lashed out wildly with the blade. Gordan, in a show of strength, not only blocked the sword from hitting his body, but also shoved the burman backwards several steps.

“You are certainly well versed in the manner of your swords defensive capabilities. However, a longer sword such as mine is more suited to offensive attacks!” Gordan observed, moving to attack.

Fedrich didn’t block the strike, but redirected the force so the longer sword struck the paved ground, leaving Gordan vulnerable. Releasing his right arm from his sword, Fedrich curled it into a fist and slammed his knuckles against Gordan’s jaw. The burman quickly jumped back, out of the range of Gordan’s sword to secure his hands onto his own blade.

“My father taught me to make use of a short swords lighter weight, to use the enemy’s energy against him when agility is your strength.” Fedrich further commented.

“Then your father is a skillful teacher.” Gordan complemented, rubbing his face.

The dark haired man rushed forward again, swinging his sword out for Fedrich to easily block. However, Gordan adjusted his hold on the sword so the flat of the blade rushed at the burman, and he lowered the path so it would hit below the opposing sword’s blade. Fedrich cried out in pain as the metal

hit his fingers with a loud slap, his sword falling to the ground. Before the human could do anything else to harm the burman, Fedrich leapt into the air as high as his legs would push him. He attained a height almost twice as tall as the Hall before succumbing to gravity, landing on the opposite end of the square. Fedrich spun around, and he froze when his eyes met the metal glint of Gordan's sword pointed at his face.

"I had forgotten of the burman's incredible leaping abilities." Gordan explained. "However, once I could follow your movement in the sky, it was a simple matter to predict where you would land and the direction you would be facing."

Gordan pushed the blade forward, the very tip of the blade piercing Fedrich's skin, surprising the youth. He then drew the sword back, a small portion of the blade coated in red blood. Lifting the blade up, he inspected it before calling out a declaration.

"First blood is mine!" Gordan announced to all.

"Okay then, enough of this!" Gerick commanded.

Fedrich looked at the Regulators, his eyes wide in shock. "Does that mean I won't be accepted?"

Gerick looked at his members with his smile.
“Well, what do you all think?”

“His agility’s an advantage, especially that jumping power.” Ruthy commented.

“In raw strength he’s not as good, but I suppose sacrificing it for speed isn’t all that bad.” Illis added.

“His swordsmanship with a short blade is commendable, as well as his tenacity.” Gordan furthered.

“So there no arguments about lettin’ him sign on?” Gerick asked the group.

For a moment, Fedrich held his breath as the chance for his membership into the Regulators was in the balance. His hands grew sweaty suddenly, his grip on his sword no longer as firm as it was. However, a glance at Gerick, revealing the old man’s unceasing grin, made his worries fade away.

“Well, since there’s no one against it, let me be the first ta welcome you to the Regulators.”

* * *

Fedrich woke up with the sunlight, the morning rays reaching his eyes through a window and stirring his senses. He shifted around on the cot, muscles

still sore after his fierce trail the day before. A finger rubbed his forehead, feeling a scab beneath his fur where the only blood of the duel was drawn. Yawning wide, he sat up rubbed his eyes, clearing his vision to the spartan room he was granted at the Hall. A portable cot, thin sheets and pillows, and a dresser with a small mirror were all the accommodations afforded to him. He stood up and donned his clothing minus hat, then stepped out of the guest room and into the main conference hall to see if anyone was around. Sure enough, he saw Gerick sitting at the center table with another individual who looked horribly fatigued.

“Good morning.” He announced.

“G’morning ta yourself.” Gerick muttered.

“Aw, give him a break. He’s just trying to be friendly.” The other member piped up.

Gerick only grunted, so the other member stood up in his place. “I suppose you’re Fedrich. I was supposed to meet you yesterday, but I got caught up at a late night meeting at the castle. The name’s Mackenzie Terrace, but most people call me Macky.”

Macky offered a hand, which Fedrich accepted.
“Fedrich Castor. You said you were at the castle?”

“Yep. Seeing that we help defend the city from monsters, whenever the army has a general meeting, I have to go along and make reports along with the rest of the security teams.”

“So you aren’t out and fighting with the others?”

“Not anymore. I’m the brain behind the scene, mainly managing the money and paying bills and rent. I’m not too good a fighter as it is.”

“Oh.”

“So what about you? Why’d you come and join up with us?”

“I came to Lindblum to participate in the Festival of the Hunt to get the Master Hunter title. My father wanted me to go out and make a name for myself instead of staying in Burmecia, so this seemed like the best choice.”

Macky grinned, walking for a table with some foods on it. “Ain’t it, though. The Festival isn’t for another four months, so why come now?”

“I suppose he wanted me to strike out on my own to see if I could handle it for a few months. It would

be kind of pointless to come here, win the title, then go back home, wouldn't it?"

"That it would. Coffee?" He offered.

"Sure."

Macky gathered two mugs and filled them with the bitter brew, then handed one off to Fedrich. They both took a swig, enjoying the hot flavors for a silent moment.

"So how've things been working out so far? From what I've heard, it seems you've been shoved into an entirely new lifestyle in less than a week."

"Well, it's got its challenges. Living off scavenging monster hides is a lot more complicated than I thought, and the size of everything is still shocking to me. I mean, Burmecia is a large city, but it's set at the base of a mountain. Lindblum is like a man made mountain! Everything is so high in the sky, and it was all made by human hands!"

"I know the feeling. I've lived here my whole life, but I still get amazed whenever I stop and think about it."

"So back to topic, are we doing anything today?"

“Nope,” Gerick finally spoke, holding his own coffee. “The city’s holdin’ a festival today, and I’m plannin’ on attending.”

“What festival is it?”

“Ack, it’s really an excuse to relax, but it’s for the Princess’ birthday.”

Fedrich froze up for a moment, his fur ruffling against his clothes. His mind immediately brought up the strange dream he had two nights ago, remembering a tidbit of information.

...Beware the princess’ sixteenth birthday, for that will signal the start of this tragedy...

“What Princess do you mean!” Fedrich demanded.

Both Gerick and Macky were surprised at the burman’s shout, but the elder man responded first. “The Princess of Alexandria, ’o course. The Regent doesn’t have an heir yet, despite the fact he’s gray all over!”

“And how old is she today?”

“Fourteen, I think.” Macky answered.

Fedrich let loose with a sigh, feeling a great burden lift from his shoulders. The two elder Regulators looked at the burman with strange expressions.

“Why are you actin’ so concerned about it?” Macky asked.

Fedrich froze up again, realizing his concerns weren’t in the least bit rational. He didn’t want the others to think that he was mentally unbalanced, so he quickly tried to make up an excuse.

“No reason... really. I just didn’t know that the Princess’ birthday was around this time of year!”

“No worries, it’s not like anyone would expect you to know it.” Macky commented, eyeing the burman. “In any case, I’m going down to Fabool Square to get an early start for shopping. You comin’, Gerick?”

“I’ll be down later. I gotta catch up on a few errands.”

“Okay, I’ll see you later this evening.” Macky waved, leaving the hall for the streets.

“So Fedrich, you have anythin’ in mind for the day?” Gerick asked.

“No... not really.”

“Well, the festival’s gonna end today, so why not get out ‘n relax a bit?”

“I guess I will. There is still a lot about Lindblum I want to see.”

“That’s the spirit!” Gerick praised, slapping the burman on his shoulder. “Go an’ have yourself a good time tonight! Perhaps you’ll meet a pretty lady ta share it with!”

Fedrich laughed dryly, then went back to his room to retrieve his hat and pouch of Gil. Securing both, he exited the Hall and struck out for the streets and the sights.

Chapter Four

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Enjoy...

:Faraway Dreams:

Chapter Four:

Fedrich stopped at a bench and sat down, giving his clawed feet a chance to rest. The festival celebrating the Princess' birthday was truly a unique experience, especially since it wasn't even for Lindblum royalty. People were walking along the streets in droves, and the Business District was alive and roaring with the sound of voices. He pulled out a small piece of dried meat and chewed on it, a late afternoon snack to complete his small lunch.

This city seems to be filled to the point of bursting with people. I wonder where they manage to live among the industries and shops...

After finishing his snack, he stood up and made his way further towards the Hunter's Gate, pushing through the masses of people to Lavilero's Inn. Fedrich had completely forgotten that he still had five days of official usage of the room he paid for, and most of his things were still there.

I hope that the owner is willing to refund me at least some of my money since I won't need to sleep here.

Spying the Inn, he moved through the crowds to enter the main room, the sound of people talking significantly quieter. The same worker was sitting at his post, looking to be reading the same paper he had two days prior. Fedrich quickly ascended the stairs to his room, unlocking the door and revealing the drab surroundings of his first day of being independent. He went to the dresser and pulled out his clothes, stuffing them into his pack as well as the other items he forgot. Gathering the pack up, he exited the room and locked the door, then proceeded downstairs to the main desk.

“Excuse me.” Fedrich spoke, getting the worker’s attention. “Is it possible to get refunded for days not needed here?”

“Depends.” The worker muttered.

“Well, I paid for seven days in a room, and it’s only been two full nights so far, so is it possible to get back the five days Gil I paid for?”

“What’s your name?”

“Fedrich Castor.”

The man reached out for a thick book and took it into his hands, opening the dirty cover and flipping through several layers of paper. After several seconds of scanning the contents of the book, he reached under the desk and pulled out a box filled with various coins.

“Alright.” The man sighed. “Five days payment at eighty Gil is... four hundred total.”

He pulled out four one hundred coin pieces and placed them on the counter before Fedrich. He then dropped the book in front of him and rolled a grease pencil into the groove.

“Sign at your name.”

Fedrich picked up the pencil and scribbled his name into the appropriate line. The worker than took back both book and pencil and put them aside, picking up his paper to start reading again while muttering something that sounded like ‘have a good day’. Fedrich picked up the four coins and pocketed them, wishing the worker a good day and heading back out into the busy marketplace. Adjusting his pack to a comfortable place on his shoulders, he headed towards the Aircab station to get a lift to the Theater district to drop off his things.

The Aircab station was crowded, people rushing through the closed space get a lift to other parts of the city. Fedrich quickly scurried through the knots of limbs, using his advanced hearing to try to hear any departing cabs going to the Theater District. Ears finally picking up someone declaring a cab for his destination, he quickly shoved his way towards the Aircab while shouting apologizes left and right. With a final lunge, he flew into the Aircab as the operator closed the door and started up the mist engine. Moving to the rear, he settled down just as the craft leaned forwards and began accelerating towards the Theater District.

There sure are lots of people out today...

Fedrich reached to his hat and adjusted it again, idly stroking the chocobo feather pinned to its rough material. He let his mind wander aimlessly, but he still couldn't shake the subconscious worry the prophetic dream instilled into his head.

It's only going to be two more years until the Alexandrian Princess turns sixteen, and that's when all this chaos is supposed to begin. I don't know why I'm so worried about it, though. Is it because I was chosen to see into this future? Maybe that group of people is somehow connected to me... or maybe I'm supposed to join them in this battle for the world...

The Aircab around him suddenly slung around to the right, and Fedrich looked past the operator to see the Theater station approaching rapidly. He silently cursed, wondering why he was letting the concerns of a faraway dream bother him so greatly. The Aircab slid into the station, doors opening to an equally crowded area of people seeking transport. Fedrich exited the cabin and navigated his way through the crowd until he could easily move along the streets. Walking slowly, he passed by the numerous homes and shops of the area until he came upon the familiar square the Hall sat on.

“Home sweet home.” He announced to the air.

He passed through the doors of the Hall, seeing no one inside, and assuming they were all out and enjoying the final hours of the festival. His ears picked up the sound of feet thumping on the wood floor, and Fedrich immediately wondered who they belonged to.

“Sis?” A voice rang out from the passage to his left.

“No, it’s Fedrich!” The burman answered.

A moment later the redheaded form of Ruthy stepped into the main room of the Hall, a grin across her face. “Sorry about that, I’ve been looking for my sister most of the day. You haven’t seen her around, have you?”

“No.”

Ruthy moaned, frustrated. “Jeez, she told me that she would go with me to a nice dinner tonight.”

“Well, that’s not exactly kind of her.” Fedrich commented.

“It’s no big deal. She’s probably out with Gordan somewhere, I swear...”

The two remained silent for a few seconds until Ruthy’s face lit up with an idea.

“Say Fedrich, would you like to go with me for something to eat?”

Fedrich thought for a moment, then nodded in agreement. “Sure! Just let me drop off my stuff and we can go whenever you’re ready.”

“Okay!”

The burman walked down the same passageway Ruthy stood in, then tossed his pack into the spare room he slept in. He then went back to Ruthy’s side, and the two left the Hall and struck out towards the upper levels of the District.

“So, is there a place you had in mind?” Fedrich asked.

“Yeah, it’s a place called the Blue Crow just a little walk from here. They are cutting their normal prices by half for today only, so I wanted to take advantage of that and have a grand feast.”

“Sounds like a good idea.”

“It is! Normally their menu is horridly expensive, but this time Gil won’t be such a concern for me.” Ruthy smirked.

“So, what kind of food do they serve?”

“Oh, they have a pretty big variety for a restaurant outside the Business District, but they mainly deal in fresh meats and fish.”

“Sounds appealing.”

“Lo and behold, we have arrived.” Ruthy declared, pointing a thin finger towards a building to their right, front occupied with several tables and blue decorations dominating the area. Expectedly, most of the tables outside were occupied, servers calmly dashing around with carefully balanced plates at their shoulders.

“You sure we can find a table?” Fedrich questioned.

“Of course, it just might take some time for one to be readied.”

The two entered the Blue Crow, and a server calmly showed them to a small table at the rear of the main room. Once seated, the server gave them two menus, a list of the daily specials and drinks, and then left them to tend to other patrons. Fedrich looked over the menu, seeing nearly five times the selections offered at Farrel’s cafe.

“There is a lot to choose from...” He commented.

“Yeah, but I’ve been ready to try their deluxe beef and salad for a while. Gordan told me that it was the best they have to offer.”

“So he’s been here before?”

“Yes. His family was once well known presence in social gatherings until they were accused of fraudulent spending a few years ago. Since then, he’s been working towards paying off his family’s debt to the city. They came here nearly every day, but not since the incident.”

“How tragic.”

“Yeah. Poor Gordan has been working himself so hard to fix his parents problems, even though it’s their own to deal with.”

“He must really love them to work so hard to help fix their problems.”

“Well, wouldn’t anyone do the same in that situation?”

Fedrich nodded. “You’re right, anyone would have done so.”

Appearing from the background, a different server appeared with a tablet in hand. “Are we ready to make a selection?”

“Yes,” Ruthy answered. “I’d like to have the deluxe beef and salad platter, please.”

“And how would Madam like her beef?”

“Well done, please.”

“Very well,” The server scribbled. “And Sir?”

“I’ll have the same, well done, please.”

“Very well, and what will you have for drinks?”

“I’ll have some Black ale.” Fedrich stated.

“I will have the house wine.” Ruthy added.

“Excellent. The meal will be ready within a few minutes.” The server informed, walking away.

Fedrich and Ruthy remained silent for a few moments, the murmur of people washing through the main room alongside the clinking of silverware. The burman looked around the room, seeing various forms of artwork lining the walls, silken drapes hanging from the ceiling, all in different shades of blue. The entire place oozed with an aura of somber feelings, yet the lively discussions between the patrons defied the saddening atmosphere.

“Could I ask you a question, Fedrich?”

Fedrich looked back towards Ruthy and nodded.
“Sure.”

“Well, you told us that you came to Lindblum to become the next Master Hunter to honor your family, but is it really what you wanted to do?”

“What do you mean by that?”

“When you told us about it, you seemed... disappointed, like it really wasn’t what you wanted in life.”

“Well...” Fedrich began. “I guess so...”

“I see...”

“I still have mixed feelings about coming here, though. My father was a sergeant for the Burmecian guards, and he always dreamed that someday I would join them as well. But for some reason, a year ago he reversed his desire for me and wanted me to come here instead.”

“Huh, that’s odd.” Ruthy commented.

“Really?”

“Well, a year ago, the prince of Burmecia was reported to have run away, along with one of the top Dragon Knights.”

“Prince Puck and Lady Freya Crescent, yes. Sir Fratley Iron-Tail also has been gone for nearly two years as well, and he was the strongest of all Dragon Knights. It’s like all the important people of Burmecia are all leaving...”

“Maybe your father didn’t want you to join the Guards because of that.”

“That could be it.” Fedrich pondered. “But why would that be a problem?”

“I don’t know.”

Fedrich let his shoulders slump, “Well, you don’t need to worry about it, it’s my concern.”

“Still, though, you shouldn’t feel obligated to do this if you wanted to join the Guards.” Ruthy pressed.

“It’s not that there’s anything wrong with this!” Fedrich quickly added. “It’s as good a goal in life as any other, I guess I’m still unsure of why my father was so hasty to change his wishes.”

“I think I understand how you feel.”

The two let the silence go for a long moment, but Fedrich spoke up after curiosity poked his mind.

“Might I ask why you’re concerned about it?”

“Well, when I saw your disappointment back then, I just... thought for a moment that maybe the feelings you had were the same as mine.”

“Oh? So being a Regulator isn’t something you want?”

Ruthy glanced to the ceiling, grasping for words. “Well, my sister was quick to join the Regulators when she heard of them, and she later wanted me to join up instead of staying at home. I was perfectly comfortable staying at home to work, but I didn’t want to disappoint my sister, so I agreed to try out.”

“You seemed rather eager back in the fields.” Fedrich commented.

“A person needs to have a certain energy to work, and it’s not like one can fight monsters with a sour attitude!” She joked.

“True.”

“So it seems we have more in common than it looks.”

Fedrich was about to reply, but a plate interrupted him as it was set at his place, another server placing Ruthy’s meal before her. The servers walked away,

and the two Regulators let the conversation end at that.

* * *

The later afternoon skies were darkening, providing a blanket of reds and purples to coat the sky as daytime dwindled into night. The crowds of people out for the festival had lessened, but the energy of the city was still running strong as nighttime businesses opened. The air inside Lindblum's walls was filled with lights from Aircabs, generating an almost serene atmosphere as if observing a cloud of fireflies over a dark lake. Fedrich and Ruthy had finished their meal, and were walking back to the Hall in silent company to the setting sun.

"So, is your home far from here?" Fedrich asked, breaking the quiet.

"It's just farther down the street from the Hall, close to the Fuegert Memorial Hall."

"Okay."

"Well, I'm going to turn in for the evening. I'm sure Illis will be furious if I don't get back before nightfall."

“Then I’ll see you tomorrow, Ruthy. Goodnight.” Fedrich said with a tip of his hat. “And thank you for the meal.”

“No problem, Fedrich, Goodnight.” She smiled.

The redhead briskly walked through the square, disappearing into the darkening shadows stretching across the streets. Fedrich watched as she left, then gave a smile of satisfaction and continued into the Hall. Once inside, the artificial light from numerous lamps revealed that Gerick was present, wiping his forehead as he inspected his battle hammer.

“Good evening, Gerick.” Fedrich announced.

“Back already, eh?” He mumbled, peering at some unknown mark on his weapon. “I figured you’d be out ‘till the morning hours exporin’ the city.”

“I think I’ve seen enough today to sate my appetite for exploration. It would take weeks to do everything I wanted here.”

“Too true, kiddo, and you’ve got time a-plenty to do so.”

“I’ll be going to bed now, so Goodnight.”

“G’night, then. My room’s on the second floor if you need me. We’ll be gettin’ up bright an’ early tomorrow, so get a good sleep.”

“I will.”

Chapter Five

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Enjoy...

:Faraway Dreams:

Chapter Five:

Fedrich looked around, seeing inky blackness everywhere his eyes darted to. With a flash of light, he found himself hovering in front of a familiar castle, looking inside a bedroom and seeing a young woman sitting on a chair, staring in a mirror. The image then shifted, revealing a massive airship docked near a castle, a play being held on its decks. Fedrich quickly realized what the images were, and he looked around in a futile effort to see who was doing this to him.

“Phantom! I know you’re around here, come out!”

I have no means to showing you my true form

“Well... why are you showing me this again?”

You obviously did not believe me last time we spoke, so I determined that another message was needed

“Another message? This is the same thing as last time!”

Unfortunately, my influence in this place is limited, and this is all I can do

“If you can’t show me more of this, then can you at least tell me why you’re showing this to me?”

Have you ever considered your future?

“My future?” Fedrich repeated, confused.

The future I show you is a culmination of individual fates tied together in a complex web called destiny, and much like a spiders web, is supported and maintained by a few important lines

“And?”

***What happens when you cut the strands of silk
that hold up a spiders web?***

“The web would fall down from wherever it was hanging.”

Yes

Silence pressed down on Fedrich for several seconds.

“...And your point?” He asked, annoyed.

Do you not understand the metaphor?

“No...”

The entire web of drastic events to come can be easily undone and destroyed, brining ruination to everything that was within it

“And this would be a bad thing?”

This web will result in a certain history being created, but destroying it will create a history that is either better than what it would be untouched, or possibly worse

“Then this future is going to happen... and messing with it could make things better or much worse, right?”

Simply put, yes

“Then why are you telling me this? Isn’t there a chance that telling me could mess things up even worse?”

Because your fate is intertwined with an important string in this web of destiny, your knowledge of this web allows you the freedom to move yourself around in a manner to strengthen it or weaken it

“And what would you have me do?”

Silence.

“Phantom?”

Silence reigned still, and Fedrich’s anger rose again.

“Come back here! Don’t leave me hanging like this!”

Fedrich looked around, and his vision fell onto the forgotten screen showing the images that made up his vision. The final segment passed, the ruined airship flying into the Falcon’s gate, and the screen disappeared and left Fedrich alone in his dark environment. Then, like before, a blinding image of

a crystal embedded itself into his eyes, and he felt it's raw energy course through his body.

Fedrich shot up from his cot with a cry of panic, again woken up by the intense feelings that the vision gave him. Just then, a knock sounded on his door, and the burman wondered if Gerick heard him.

“Come in?” He spoke hoarsely.

The door swung open, letting dim light filter into the spare room, Gerick’s large form standing in the doorframe. “Its daybreak, kiddo. Time ta get up and get ready for work.”

“Okay, I’ll be up in a minute.” Fedrich replied.

“Alright.” The elder man muttered, closing the door to leave Fedrich in darkness.

The burman stood up and stretched, cracking his fingers and rubbing the sleep from his eyes. He then stepped carefully to the center of the room and unblocked the lamp, letting artificial light shine into the room and uncover his surroundings. He opened the dresser and pulled out a pair of mud colored pants, a dull white shirt and his green vest. Donning the apparel, he looped his belt around his waist, slung his sword across his shoulders, and gathered his hat before leaving his room. Passing down the

hall, he entered the central room, saw Gerick, the sisters Illis and Ruthy, and Gordan, all in durable attire, and armed with their weapons of choice.

“Good morning, all.” Fedrich announced.

“Well then, that makes the last of us.” Gerick commented. “Might as well get movin’.”

“So what are we doing today?” Fedrich asked.

“The same thing we do every mornin’, patrol the walls for anythin’ out of place, then strike out to the plains. I’ll explain what else we do when it comes.”

Gerick and the rest of the group left the hall and walked to the Aircab station in silence, the early morning air crisp and cold. Few people were up, most of those who were awake preparing for another day of business. Once at the station, finding an Aircab was a simple matter, the platforms barely occupied. The operator quickly directed the flying cab down towards the Business station, not being forced to battle for airspace in the early morning hours. Once on land, the group exited the Business District and began the long descent down the many flights of stairs that exited out into the open fields of the Lindblum Plateau. An hour after leaving the

Hall, Fedrich touched clawed feet to the dirt with a determined air, the others reflecting the same.

“Alright,” Gerick finally spoke towards the burman, breaking the silence. “The patrol around the city border’s gonna be what takes up most of our time. Dependin’ on what’s around, we could be going ’round the walls until late afternoon. Then we’ll take a break and head out in’ta the field to check the trails.”

“Sounds easy enough.” Fedrich commented.

“It can be, some days, but it’s still dangerous work.” Gerick warned. “Don’t let the flat land lure you ta thinkin’ well see the enemy before they attack. Some monsters’ll hide in the grass, even underground at times.”

“Also we must be especially cautious when entering the city shadow, where monsters are more likely to reside and are difficult to spot. Despite our combined strengths and experience, I believe I can safely say that even we are hesitant when entering the shadow.” Gordan added.

“I could imagine so.” Fedrich mused, looking at the brightening morning sky.

“I did a little reading, and it came to my knowledge that Burman’s have an advanced hearing that is vastly superior to a humans.” Gordan spoke. “Once we enter the shadow, value your hearing more than your eyes, since it is your natural strength.”

“I will.” Fedrich replied quietly.

“Enough o’ the chattering, now.” Gerick insisted. “Let’s get movin’.”

The Regulators kept up a fast pace during the patrol around the massive hills and walls that surrounded Lindblum. Fedrich was wide eyed at the scenery, seeing many new things that weren’t at all common in Burmecia. The grass was reedy and thickly patched, sometimes almost as tall as his waist as they moved along. Occasionally the artificial form of an Airship would appear overhead, the loud whir of the mist engine giving it away so Fedrich could look up and watch it gently fly into the city. Save the sound of Airships, Fedrich noticed a background theme of insect buzzing and the chirp of birds, a natural blanket of nature’s creations that hardly graced the cold mountains of his home.

After a few hours of walking, Fedrich was feeling his legs grow weary of the demanding pace set by

his comrades. However, the other Regulators didn't seem to be showing any signs of fatigue as they plodded on, something that made the burman even more determined to stay with them. Their patrol took them farther and farther around the city, the walls of Lindblum pressing on them from the sky and the orb of the sun beating on their shoulders. It was only after until Fedrich suspected that noon passed by that he spied a shadow against the hills and walls. His muscles tensed, remembering the words from his comrades earlier.

"You ready for this?" Gerick asked, the elder man a step ahead of the burman.

"As ready as one can be." Fedrich answered plainly.

The shadow of the massive city came up quickly, and Fedrich could literally see waves of tension rise from the other people around him. Once they passed out of the sunlight, the ground quickly grew darker and less defined, losing its unique and intricate designs to a simple appearance of a flat surface. After several minutes of walking, the light soon faded away to a memory, and the land looked as if it was under a premature nightfall. The burman's fur ruffled at his back, his sensitive hearing taking every

sound as a potential threat, sending paranoid thoughts into his mind.

Fedrich flinched when a hand landed on his shoulder, nearly forcing a gasp of surprise from his lips. He looked to his side and saw the darkened form of Gordan standing nearby, the noble man's eyes showing concern and words of comfort. Fedrich pushed his nervousness aside and nodded, putting on a strong front.

The regulators all sighed with relief after passing through the city shadow, finally back into the brightening sunlight.

“Well, it looks like the monsters were bein’ cautious this time ’round.” Gerick declared, propping his battle hammer across his shoulders. “Looks like thing’ll be easy for ya, Fedrich.”

“I suppose that’s a mixed blessing. I was hoping that—”

Fedrich stopped mid-sentence, his ears perking up as sounds bombarded his advanced ears. His eyes widened, sound forming into that of heavy footsteps and the deep chirping of some creature.

“Fedrich?” Gerick spoke. “You were sayin’?”

Fedrich was still as possible, his ears translating sound into information the burman was trying to tie together. He began to fret when the deep sound of footsteps began to speed up, growing closer at a pace that scared him.

“Are you—” Ruthy started.

“Watch out!” Fedrich shouted, seconds before two giant monsters trampled over a slight hill, screeching at the regulators.

The group of people fled in different directions, the two monsters stopping in the center and looking around in confusion. The beasts were frightening to look at, bearing a scaly hide of yellow, small legs with black claws, and an oversized beak as if belonging to groundless birds.

“Iron Beaks!” Gerick shouted. “This is gonna be tough. Everyone, rush the left Iron Beak and give it everything you have!”

Gerick, being closest to the beast, rushed at it and hefted his battle hammer, swinging down at its beak. The heavy metal hammer hit the monster with a loud crack, splinters forming on the beak, which caused the beast to flair about in pain. With a mighty swing, the bird hit Gerick and knocked the elder

man several meters away, incapacitating him for the moment. Illis and Gordan immediately counter attacked, swords drawn and arcing down to slash at exposed scale, piercing the beast's body and spilling its reddish blood.

“Ruthy!” Illis shouted, “Take care of the other one!”

“Yeah!” The younger sister stated, drawing an arrow into her longbow.

The second Iron Beak, staying to the side as its cohort was attack, screeched in agony as an arrow impaled itself into its bulky body. Further angered, the beast looked around and found the archer drawing another arrow to the string. With a shrill roar, it began a lumbering run towards the redheaded woman. The archer let fly a second arrow, but the metal tipped projectile was deflected off the large beak of the monster, barely damaging the thick bone.

Panicked, Ruthy looked on as the beast stamped towards her, unable to move her legs to escape. However, a gray blur slammed into the beak of the monster, knocking it into the dirt and forcing a screech of pain from its jaws. Ruthy looked carefully, and the blur formed itself into the shape of

Fedrich, his short sword almost buried to the hilt in the thick beak.

“Ruthy!” Fedrich shouted, snapping her out of her trance.

“Right!” She declared, drawing another arrow and aiming for the Iron Beak’s leg. Fedrich jumped off the beast, minus his sword, and landed near it as an arrow shattered it’s stubby leg. With quick motions, Ruthy strung another arrow and pulled back, firing the projectile at the beast and adding to the wounds in it’s body. Two more arrows followed in seconds, and the monster finally keeled over and died, an arrow firmly impaled between its eyes. The redhead jogged to the monster’s side, seeing Fedrich tug and pull on his sword to free it from the beak.

“Having trouble?” She asked jokingly.

“Just a little.” He returned with a smirk. “This thing’s stuck tight.”

The burman firmly placed a foot on the beak, then pulled with all his strength and finally freed his blade from the monsters corpse, also falling onto his back with a yelp of surprise. Ruthy tried to hold her composure, but broke down in a fit of snickers as Fedrich looked at her with a sour expression.

“Kick when he’s down, eh?” He asked.

Ruthy just smiled, offering a hand and assisting the burman to his clawed feet.

“So, what are we gonna do with these things?” Fedrich asked.

“Iron Beaks are known for having strong beaks, hence the name.” Ruthy began, looking and seeing the other three Regulators inspecting the other dead monster. “The problem is that you can’t carry them, since they are so heavy. The only thing we can do is try and break off pieces of the beak and pack them for sale.”

“I guess they are good for armor?”

“That they are. Blacksmiths can take sections of the beak and use them for armor. The fun part is trying to haul back as much of this as we can.”

“Sounds like it.” Fedrich added quietly.

“Well, might as well go and start picking up whatever Gerick can knock off.”

The two walked over to the corpse alongside the others, watching as Gerick swung his battle hammer down on the beak to force it to pieces. Following several swings, the beak finally began to fall off the

corpse, and the others collected the fallen pieces and cleaned them off. After dealing with the first Iron Beak, the group proceeded to the second beast and scoured off as much of the beak as possible before striking off to complete their round about the city.

“Is anyone else here feeling tired?” Fedrich asked, wiping his brow for the umpteenth time.

The others all muttered similar feelings, but Gerick was quick to address their concerns.

“Don’t worry ‘bout it. The city gate’s just a stones throw away, and we can take a good rest and deliver these beak pieces to Corban before goin’ back out.”

“What about you, Gerick? You took a nasty hit back there.” Illis commented.

The elder man chuckled. “It’s nothin’ I can’t handle.”

“You sure?” She pressed.

“O’ course I am!” He boasted. “I haven’t been leader o’ the Regulators for seven years only ’ta be beaten by a lousy Iron Beak!”

“Alright, boss, you can ease up on the ego trip.” Illis muttered.

Ruthy approached her sister, leaning close. “Why are you concerned about him, sis? He looks fine to me.”

“Don’t be stupid, look at his left leg.” She whispered back.

The redhead glanced at Gerick’s leg, and she immediately noticed that he was treating it gingerly, his pack of beak fragments on the opposite shoulder, and his battle hammer casually following his footsteps as a crutch. She narrowed her lips, wondering if he was worse off than he let on.

“You think we should stop him?” She asked.

“Nah, let the old man save his pride for the moment, he’ll be in pain soon enough.”

* * *

“Damn, Gerick, ya certainly managed to pull in a good haul!” Corban commented, viewing the wealth of beak shards on his table.

“It wasn’t easy picking, though, but I managed ’ta work them over without any problems.”

“Alright, I’ll haul this to the scales.”

The tattooed man took an armful of the shards to a large scale, dropping them on one side to unbalance it. After several trips, he finally began to add in metal weights until he brought the scale to an even balance.

“I’ll be, forty seven kilos of beak! This must’a been hellacious work.”

“Carrying it was almost tougher than killin’ them!”

“So what is the payment for the frgments?” Gordan questioned.

“Well, armor sales have been on the rise for a bit, so demand is up for the raw material.” Corban explained. “So methinks that thirty Gil per kilo is a fair deal compared ’ta twenty seven Gil.”

“Alright, ring it up.” Gerick agreed.

“Okay,” Corban started, scrunching up his face. “Now thirty multiplied by forty seven... it’s more than a thousand, for certain...”

“The total is fourteen hundred and ten Gil.” Gordan answered.

“You sure?” Corban asked.

“As sure as I can be sure that my hair is black.”
He joked.

“I’ll get some ink ’n find out.”

Corban picked up a well of ink and dipped a quill into it, then did some math on his table and came up with the same conclusion. The worker grinned and reached under his table for the Gil he kept.

“Right as ever, Gordo!”

“It’s Gordan...” He moaned, unwanting of the gentle worker’s nickname.

“Okay, here’s your payment for the beak.” Corban replied, handing a small sack of coins to Gerick.

“Thanks be to you, friend. I’ll see ya tomorrow!”

“Farewell, and good huntin’!”

The Regulators all exited the Hide shop, Gerick handing out payments as they left the alley and entered the main street. The daylight was already fading from the shops, the immense height of Lindblum only offering the sun a mere few hours to pour direct sunlight into the lowest levels of the District. Gerick looked up, then tapped the end of

his battle hammer on the ground to gather the attention of his comrades.

“Alright, everyone, let’s get back ’ta work.”

The others are made agreeing remarks, and they took their first steps towards Hunter’s Gate. Gerick took a step on his injured side, and his face scrunched up in pain, hesitation stiffening his body. Fedrich looked back, and he quickly noticed the elder man’s pained expression.

“Gerick? Are you okay?” He asked, worried.

“I’m fine, Fedrich, just a little... dizzy...”

Everyone stopped and looked back, Ruthy and Illis both worried while Gordan’s face registered shock and surprise as Gerick began to teeter on his feet. His fingers loosened, and the battle hammer fell over and clattered on the cobblestone with a metallic echo, soon followed by the heavy thud of his body falling next to it.

Chapter Six

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Enjoy...

:Faraway Dreams:

Chapter Six:

“Gerick!” Ruthy screamed, looking down at the fallen man.

Illis, shaking off her worry, rushed to the old man’s side and rolled him onto his back. Gerick’s face was convulsed in pain, and she knew that it was his battle injury finally catching up with him. She reached to his waist and untucked his shirt, lifting it slightly to see a large purple bruise already forming across his side.

“It’s the wound he took in the fight, he must have succumbed to the pain after holding it back so long.” She announced to everyone. “I don’t think we’ll be going back to the field anytime soon.”

“Is it bad?” Fedrich asked.

“No, but he’s just getting too old to take this kind of abuse in stride.” She looked to her younger sister. “Ruthy, go and find a doctor to help us. Everyone else get out any potions you have to help with the pain.”

Ruthy turned and ran down the street, looking for a doctor’s office, while the other Regulators gathered up their healing potions and other remedies. Illis propped Gerick up and uncorked one of the healing potions, forcing the vial into Gerick’s mouth.

“Drink up, old man, this’ll help with the pain.”

Despite the pain evident on his face, Gerick managed to swallow the blue liquid and open his eyes to an upset looking Illis.

“Heh... so perhaps I’m not alright...”

The dark clothed woman growled lightly. “Idiot, you could have serious injuries, but you let your

manly pride take priority!"

"Can't blame me fer trying to look good, can you?"

"Actually, I can." She replied smartly.

Before Gerick could retaliate, another vial of healing potion was forced into his mouth, nearly choking the elder man as he swallowed it down. Illis let him fall to the ground, standing up and looking down the street for any sign of her sister.

"You three make sure he doesn't pull anything stupid. I'm going to look for Ruthy." Illis ordered, walking away from the group.

Fedrich looked on as Illis stalked down the street, then glanced at Gordan doing the same.

"She's certainly acting out of character." The burman commented.

"Rather, she allowed her barriers to fall down to expose the woman she really is." Gordan stated quietly.

"Come again?"

"The Illis you see is just an act, the stereotypical rough and tough woman who does not need help

from anyone. In reality, she is one of the most caring and selfless women I have had the blessings to meet. It is partly due to her past that leads her to having a cold and callous appearance, but once you get to know her, you can see her for what she really is.”

Fedrich remained silent for a few moments, but Gordan rubbed his hair idly and continued. “I suppose it is all how you break things down with people. I have been a social creature for many years, so it was part of the occupation to be able to read through the masks people create.”

“And you really see that in her?” Fedrich questioned.

Gordan chuckled slightly. “I guess so, but like I already said, it is all a matter of how you perceive things.”

“Why not just fess up and admit ‘ya like her?” Gerick spoke up from behind the two.

Gordan’s face lit up in a bright red, and he looked back at the elder man to see his face nearly split open with humor.

“For one thing, it is bad manners to simply blurt out one’s feelings without proper knowledge of the other party’s feelings. Secondly, Illis and I are but

friends in the same organization, and I seriously doubt our mutual feelings go any farther than that. Thirdly, even if—”

“Ah, you can stop flappin’ your gums, Gordan, I get your point.” Gerick laughed.

“I hope that you do. Now please take the rest of the potions that we provided to help speed up your recovery.”

“Alright already.” Gerick chuckled, pushing himself to a sitting position.

Gordan nodded, then turned back to watch the streets for either of the two sisters. His eyes flicked over to Fedrich, and he could tell the burman was on the border of making his own remarks.

“Do you have anything else to add?” He asked, eyes boring into Fedrich.

“Oh no,” Fedrich replied with restraint and a smirk. “I’m just fine.”

“Good.” The nobleman remarked with a stern nod, again looking for any sign of the dark clothed woman.

Why is it always so difficult to admit to the simplest of feelings...

“They’re back.” Fedrich announced, pointing a clawed finger towards a rapidly approaching Ruthy.

A few moments later, Illis and Ruthy arrived at the scene with a gasping doctor just behind them. After catching his breath, the white haired medic stepped over towards Gerick, looking at the man with intense eyes.

“So this is him?” The Doctor asked.

“Yep.” Illis replied coolly. “One prideful old man at your disposal.”

“Hmm...” The doctor mused, stepped around and looking at Gerick as if studying artwork. “You aren’t in any severe pain?”

“Not really.” Gerick answered.

“Feel anything broken?”

“No.”

“Any bruising?”

“Yep, according to the sarcastic funeral attendee.” Gerick replied, looking at Illis.

“Bleeding?”

“No.”

“Any ill sensations?”

“Nope.”

The Doctor finally ceased his pacing, then looked up at the others present. “Seems like he just has a severe case of bruising like you suspected, although I wouldn’t rule out internal injuries.”

“So what should we do?” Ruthy asked.

“We’ll have to take him back to your residence first, there I can do some treatments and prescribe any medications he might need. Now why don’t you two men get him off his feet and start moving?”

Fedrich and Gordan nodded, then proceeded to pick Gerick up from the ground and offer their arms as supports for his injured side. Illis and Ruthy followed alongside the Doctor as the three men trained behind them, heading towards the Airship Terminal.

“Well, I highly recommend that you stay in bed for two days to gain your strength back. Also, I don’t want you to do anything that would stress your side for at least ten days.”

“Come on, Doc!” Gerick pouted. “I can’t let these kids run the show without my support fer that

long!"

The white haired doctor leaned to put his face right in front of Gerick's, looking the man down with an air of authority. "Gerick MacDougal, it is highly fortunate that you didn't suffer any broken ribs, concussions, or lacerations in light of the events that happened! I understand that you want to make sure your people do their job properly, but you cannot strain yourself so greatly as before. You're getting older by the day, and sooner or later you will have to let the younger generation take over what you started."

"Bah, age is overrated as it is. I'm still fit enough to get down with the best."

"Even if it is the truth, and I'm certain it is, I cannot allow a patient to put himself into risk while under my care." The doctor looked back at the Regulators present, eyeing each one with a stern glare. "I'll insist that you follow my directions and make sure he stays put, and don't hesitate to send for me if he gets any worse."

"We will, and thank you for coming so quickly, Doctor Harris." Illis thanked.

“Just call me Harris if you need, being called Doctor makes me feel old.” The Doctor replied with a smile, exiting the room and heading down the stairs for the streets.

Everyone turned to face Gerick, the elder leader resting in his bed at the Hall. Gerick tapped his side gingerly and winced at the pain, despite being on pain numbing medications and full of healing potions.

“So, what now?” Fedrich asked, breaking the silence.

“Now we’re gonna have ‘ta rethink the plans for the next few weeks, seein’ as how I can’t go along with you into the field.” Gerick pondered, rubbing his beard. “Not that I don’t think you can’t handle things, it’s just that I’d rather be with ya to provide backup in case of a major brawl, and this’ll definitely affect our income.”

“Well then, I guess you’ll just have to trust us to do a good job without you. It’s not like we can afford to wait for you to recover and let the monsters have free reign in the fields.” Illis decided.

“You speak the truth, Illis. Call me stubborn, but I’m just not altogether certain that things’ll stay as

good as they are.”

“Well, I can always go to the Castle and try to negotiate for additional patrols by the army security teams to make up for your absence.” Macky offered, frowning. “I think they’d be more than happy to try and prove that they can handle things better than us.”

“Yeah, those braggarts would do just that when I’m out for the count.” Gerick muttered.

“But what are we going to do now? Tomorrow we need to go back out into the field, and someone will have to stay behind to look after Gerick.” Illis wondered. “Are you up to it, Macky?”

“I suppose I could try, though my being busy at the castle would complicate things.”

“Could Ruthy stay here for part of the day?” Fedrich asked Illis.

Illis shook her head. “She’s our long range fighter, so it would only make things worse on our end if she stayed behind and a battle started up.”

“Hey, I don’t need a babysitter. I’m more than able to take care of myself.” Gerick piped up.

“Right, like you took care of your wound?” Illis snapped, drawing a glare from the wounded man.

“So I’ll assume we aren’t going back to the field?” Fedrich asked.

“Not today for certain.” Illis answered. “We’re going to have to let the security teams handle any troubles for the day.”

“Speaking of which, I should be going to the Castle to inform the Security Chief.” Macky stated. “I’ll leave the details to the rest of you.”

Macky left the room, exiting the Hall and leaving only Gerick, Illis, and Fedrich left in the room. Fedrich looked over at Illis for a moment, the woman staring through the doorjamb with a concerned expression lining her face. For that span of time, he could see that she was indeed worried about the situation, her mask no longer hiding the person Gordan described her as. Illis looked back at the burman, seeing his eyes staring at her.

“Are you worried?” Fedrich asked before she could question him, testing her.

Illis looked ready to make a snappy remark, but something in her held back, and she averted her eyes to look elsewhere. “I guess I am... Strange, isn’t it?”

“I suppose for someone like you it would be.”

Illis gave Fedrich an evil glare. “What do you mean by that?”

Fedrich was quick to surrender, holding his hands up. “Nothing! Nothing at all!”

Gerick gave a chuckle from his place on the bed. “Still can’t learn how to be polite, can we?”

“Don’t make me break those ribs for you, old man.” Illis warned.

* * *

The elderly Doctor exited the Aircab, rubbing his hair around as his legs regained their footing on solid ground. He then proceeded out of the Terminal and entered the main street, heading back towards his office farther back into the Business District. The late afternoon sky was pouring red light across the open streets, people moving through the last activities of the day. Harris gave a happy sigh, anticipating relaxing his feet and getting to his reading.

“Excuse me, Doctor, can I have a word with you?” A voice asked from his side.

Harris looked over towards the voice, seeing a young man with reddish hair leaning against a wall.
“Yeah?”

“I was around when you were treating that elderly man a while ago. Was he the leader of the Regulators?”

“That he was. What concern is it of yours?” Harris questioned.

“I came here in search of a friend, and I thought I recognized one of them among the group you helped. Do you think you could tell me where they reside so I can investigate the matter?”

“You know, there is a little thing called Doctor to Patient confidentiality. You should study up on it.” The Doctor muttered, turning to leave.

“Wait! Please, All I really want to know is if there was a black haired woman named Illis among them!” The redhead begged. “I don’t need to know anything about your patients, really!”

The Doctor hesitated a moment, then glanced back with an expression that wanted another reason.

“Please, Sir, I’ve been looking for her for years across the entire Mist Continent with few leads until

now. Would it be such a crime to tell me a simple yes or no and help me finish my search?”

The Doctor sighed, then turned and scratched his head. “If I remember, there was a young lady fitting that look.”

The redhead sighed happily, stepping forwards and gripping the man’s hands, shaking them vigorously. “Thank you so much for your help, Sir!”

“Yeah yeah, but you didn’t hear it from me.” The Doctor added with a smirk, again turning to head to his office.

Smiling for his own reasons, the redhead watched as the Doctor left, then turned and began walking for a place to eat.

It seems like my journey for you is finally coming to its climax, my dear Illis. I’ll finally be able to make you pay for abandoning us...

Chapter Seven

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Enjoy...

:Faraway Dreams:

Chapter Seven:

“Behind you!” Ruthy shouted.

Fedrich spun on his toes, sword flying out to block a lethal downward stroke from a monster's own weapon. The monster, a thieving Vice, looked on in shock as it's attack was so easily halted. The burman quickly shoved the curved blade aside and lashed out, the blade cutting across the chest of the Vice and spattering its blood through the air. Before the Vice could recover, an arrow drove itself into the

Vice's chest and threw it to the grassy plains, killing it.

"Good work, all!" Illis shouted from her battle with a group of Imps. "Don't let up!"

Fedrich was quick to find another opponent, yet another of the numerous Vice that were stealing goods and foodstuffs from a group of traveling merchants. Clawed feet tearing into the soft earth, the burman quickly advanced on the monsters, sword ready to strike them down and lead them away from the innocent people who stood in mute surprise. Leaping into the air, he aimed his flight to behead one of the thieving beasts, startling the rest to flee into the fields. With another jump into the skies, another Vice was cut down, Fedrich seeing that the others were too far away to be attacked. An arrow from Ruthy's longbow pierced the midday air and cut into the side of a retreating Vice, stunning the monster to a halt long enough for Fedrich to sprint to it's location.

Fedrich's sword arced through the air, but the Vice brought out it's own curved sword and blocked the strike easily, despite it's injury. The two engaged in a short duel, swords flashing between them and limbs maneuvering alongside. With a

growl of effort, Fedrich's burmecian blade shattered the Vice's own, again stunning the beast to a standstill. Doubling back as fast as he could, the burman impaled the Vice and ended it's life, stolen parcels of cloth and bags of spice falling from it's hand.

Fedrich leaned down to pick up the items, wondering what drove monsters to steal items they wouldn't ever be able to make use of. He understood stealing weapons or armor, even cloth to stay warm at night, but spice? The demi-human pushed his mind back to the situation, looking around him to see the present monsters all dead, the few remaining already far into the field to seek refuge from the Regulator's power. The merchants were busy assessing the damage done to their carts and tending to their frightened chocobos.

“How goes things, Fedrich!?” Illis questioned from a distance.

“I've taken a few down, but the rest managed to get away!” He replied, walking to another corpse to gather the items it stole.

“That's alright, we got most of them as it is!” She continued. “No injuries?”

“Just a scratch or two is all.”

After a few minutes of picking at the corpses of the monsters, Fedrich reunited with the other three Regulators and presented his take of the items to the merchants. They gladly accepted their wares and thanked them many times over, eventually settling on their rides and beginning their last leg of the journey to the base of Lindblum Grand Castle.

“Well, that was interesting.” Fedrich commented.
“Do these kind of attacks happen often?”

Illis nodded. “More than you’d think, really. Imps, Vices, and Goblins seem to have some obsession with stealing things from anyone not of their group, even if it’s just scraps of metal or worthless trinkets.”

“But why would they do that? It doesn’t make much sense?”

“Bestiary Scholars have been working to unravel that mystery for some time, now.” Gordan added. “Kleptomanic monsters are indeed a rarity in our world Gaia, and the best theory they have come up with is that those monsters may use their stolen goods as a means to identifying who their alpha primary is.”

“Alpha what?” Ruthy repeated.

“Alpha Primary, the monster within a group that is the dominant leader of them, much like the lead wolf in a pack.”

“Oh...” She mouthed. “I guess that makes sense.”

“So what did we get from the monsters themselves?” Illis asked.

“Mostly Goblin daggers and a few Vice swords, nothing special.” Ruthy spoke.

“I gathered seven Goblin daggers, and one of the Vice’s had an Elixir in it’s grip.” Gordan listed.

“Good find.” Illis commented with a smile.

“I picked up three Goblin daggers, and one of them had five Potions on its person.” Fedrich added.

“Alright, sounds like a good haul for the day, the six Vice swords I picked up included. We might as well head back to Lindblum and sell this off.”

“Do you think this’ll get us much?” Fedrich asked.

“Probably. Vices hardly come to the open plains, and they usually run away before anyone can stop them, so naturally their curved swords would be worth a lot.”

“That’s good. Nothing wrong with more money!” Ruthy chimed. “Especially since we need to make up for what Gerick would normally get.”

“Agreed. Let us go.” Gordan insisted.

The Regulators packed their materials and began the walk back to the Hunter’s Gate, following far behind the merchants they saved. The sun was still high in the afternoon sky, light spilling across the field to beat on the sides of the weary defenders. The past three days of patrolling without the presence of Gerick was not proving difficult, but knowing their leader was still incapacitated left them worried for his future. Nearing the age of forty, they all knew that eventually he wouldn’t be able to fight alongside them, and that was the last thing that he wanted to admit to. The Regulators was his dream, something he cultivated from mere thoughts to a organization that equaled the reputation of the Lindblum Security teams. To be unable to fight alongside the others would be the final blow to his confidence.

“So, how’re thing goin’? Corban asked.

“Okay. Gerick’s still unable to fight, but he’s pushing himself harder each day to at least get out of bed and move.” Illis replied.

“Well, be sure ’an give him my regards.”

“I will.”

“Alright, yer total comes ’ta a healthy three thousand Gil.” The tattooed man declared, pushing a small pile of coins to Illis.

“Thanks, Corban.” The elder woman nodded, taking the money.

“You stay healthy yerself, kids!”

“We will.” She ended, leaving the Hide shop.

The four Regulators exited the alleyway, Illis passing out payments to them while putting the appropriate deductions into Gerick’s own leather pouch.

“So, what—” Fedrich began.

An explosion in the main street cut off his question, everyone looking down the path to see a fireball rising into the sky. From within the flames, a

figure dashed towards the Hunter's Gate, large clothes billowing in the wind as armored Guards gave chase. The figure halted and faced the soldiers, then moved his hands around and thrust them outwards. Another explosion of fire erupted between the Guards, the force knocking them over and burning their bodies, giving the mage more time to escape.

“What in hell!?” Ruthy sputtered.

“Black magic?” Gordan pondered. “How does a human know such magic?”

“Who cares? We've got to stop him!” Fedrich shouted, drawing his own short sword.

Illis quickly grabbed his shoulder, restraining him. “Don't be foolish, that magic could kill you. Ruthy, use your longbow.”

“Right!” She agreed, slinging her bow off her shoulders and drawing an arrow to the string. Pulling back and aiming carefully, she let loose an arrow towards the fleeing mage. The arrow pierced his billowing sleeves, but by luck or skill, the projectile missed flesh and passed through, causing the mage to halt and face the Regulators. Illis

panicked when he lifted his arms, moving them in a similar fashion like before his magical attack.

“Scatter!” She screamed, shoving Fedrich aside and running away from the alleyway.

The warriors all managed to get away from the alley as the mage cast the spell, a fireball forming and exploding where they stood. The mage was quick to run again, knowing that the display of magical power was enough to stun anyone from following immediately.

Fedrich was quick to get to his feet, feeling his fur burnt from the heat of the spell. He looked around to see everyone else was unharmed, all of them getting to their feet as well.

“Illis, are you alright?” Gordan asked, offering a hand.

“I’m fine.” She replied, accepting his assistance.

“Come on, we’ve got to follow him before he gets away!” Fedrich insisted. “I’m going ahead to slow him down!”

“Fedrich, don’t be stupid!” Ruthy shouted. “We don’t know what he’s capable of, it’s too dangerous!”

“Danger is what I’m looking for!” He shouted back with a grin, ignorant of the apparent dangers.

Using his powerful legs, Fedrich sprinted for the Hunter’s gate, clawed feet giving him the added traction to outpace the others on his tail.

“Damn it!” Illis cursed. “Follow him before he gets himself killed!”

The others were quick to obey, shaking off their fear and running towards the gate, following the nimble form of the Burman. Fedrich continued his pace, looking ahead for the mage and spying the aggressor running for the freedom of the Gate stairs and the open fields. He pushed himself to his limits, faster strides drawing him closer to the mage with each moment. Soon the two passed out from under the Gate, sunlight exposing their pursuit.

“Stop!” Fedrich shouted between deep breaths.

The mage obeyed and slid to a halt, surprising Fedrich greatly as he also slowed to a standstill, lungs burning for fresh air. The two looked at one another for a second, studying one another intently.

“Alright, you—” Fedrich began.

The mage thrust his arms above his head, cutting off Fedrich's words, chanting words under his breath. Fedrich kept his sword out, ready to jump away from any danger, hoping that the mantra wasn't another fire spell. The mage then brought his arms down to point outward from his sides, and a sphere of light engulfed his body and disappeared, removing the mage from the area. Fedrich was stunned, looking around for any sign of the mage.

"What kind of magic was that?..." He asked aloud.

"It must have been some kind of warp spell." Gordan commented from behind. "It is the only logical explanation."

Fedrich looked back, seeing the others present. "But where would he have gone?"

"Obviously far enough so that you wouldn't keep chasing him." Illis spoke, glaring. "I thought I told you to stay put."

"But we couldn't just let him run away!" Fedrich pleaded, getting no response from the angered woman.

Ruthy suddenly stepped forward from the others and stood before Fedrich, looking into his face with

a stern expression. Her arm moving quickly, she gave the Burman a forceful slap across his face, almost knocking him off his feet despite her smaller form. Fedrich rubbed his face, looking at the redhead with confused eyes.

“Are you *that* stupid?” She asked, stressing each word. “That mage could have used that spell of his to incinerate you, but you still ran after him!”

“I’m sorry,” Fedrich offered quietly. “But it wouldn’t have been right to just let him get away.”

Ruthy sighed, anger fading away. “But you could have been seriously hurt...”

Fedrich looked away, unable to meet Ruthy’s face. “It’s a risk we all take. I promised all of you that I would fight all my battles with everything I had, and I didn’t want to let that bandit go free to attack others without at least trying to stop him.”

Ruthy was about to speak, but her older sister interjected. “You’ve made a perfect example of the thin line between bravery and stupidity, Fedrich. Next time, don’t act so rashly, and let us help you instead of trying to play hero.”

Fedrich nodded. “Okay, everyone.”

“Well then, now that things are settled, perhaps we should go back to the Hall and tend to whatever wounds we took.” Gordan recommended.

The group agreed, but Fedrich looked back to scan over the area one last time. “What kind of person has that kind of power? I’ve heard of humans gaining powers to use healing spells, but never attacking spells.”

“There’s never been any reason a human couldn’t learn black magics, but it’s rare to find anyone who possesses them, especially someone so young looking.” Illis explained, following the others. “Healing magic has use outside of battle, so black magic would only be known by people who were in warring times, and there hasn’t been war for many years.”

“But how can we explain him? It’s not like we imagined all this.” Fedrich pondered, keeping pace.

“There’s only one explanation, someone who knew black magic and used it in wars past must have taught it to someone else to pass the knowledge down to the next generation.”

“You know, that makes a lot of sense.” Fedrich nodded. “Where did you come up with that idea?”

Illis hesitated a moment in thought. “Like Gordan said, it is the only logical explanation.”

“I guess so.” Fedrich agreed.

“Good grief, I get put to bed and look how you people fare!” Gerick laughed, gingerly sitting in the main room of the Hall.

“You’ll be glad to hear that we didn’t get messed up because of monsters, but by some mage that attacked the main street after we left the Hide shop.” Illis informed. “We saved some merchants and picked up three thousand Gil for the effort in the fields, though.”

“Good work, now what did ya say about a mage?” Gerick asked.

“There was a young man in the street, apparently some kind of thief, and he used black magic to create fireballs to escape the city Guards. We tried to stop him, but he cast one of those spells at us and nearly sent us to the medical hall.” Illis went further, slapping Fedrich on the shoulder. “Fedrich here took the opportunity to chase after him, despite the danger, only to see the mage use a warp spell to escape.”

“Sounds like a run of bad luck, eh? I’ve heard rumors about some kinda thief with magic power runnin’ loose in Lindblum the past two days. They’ve named him the Fire Bandit since he just uses fire magic.”

“Well, it seems that we have stumbled onto something more than we suspected.” Gordan added. “Have the Security teams made any attempt to stop him?”

“They’ve tried ta, but the pesky guy just keeps usin’ his fire spells to keep them away, then disappears in some kinda ball of light. It’s got castle Security tied in knots trying to stop him. Odd thing is, not a soul has been killed considerin’ the situation, but plenty of guards’ve been toasted right good.”

“Speaking of which, are you doing better today?” Ruthy asked.

Gerick put on a wide grin. “I’m just ’bout able to stay on my feet all day long. It won’t be long before things’ll be back to normal for us!”

“That’s good.” She chimed. “I suppose we should patch up our wounds as well.”

Illis slid a pouch off her hip, then tossed it on the table in front of Gerick. “Here’s the fifteen hundred Gil payment.”

“Thank you.” Gerick muttered, picking up his pouch to count the earnings.

“I’ll get the medicine for us.” Ruthy insisted.

“I’ll be going to my room, rather.” Fedrich said, excusing himself from the room.

“Why?” Ruthy asked.

Fedrich’s fur ruffled. “I’m gonna have a fun time grooming all the burnt fur off my body for a few hours instead.”

Illis snickered. “Aw, did the poor guy get his fur burned off?”

“Such are the dangers of playing with fire in a flammable fur coat.” Fedrich chuckled, turning to attend to his task.

Chapter Eight

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Enjoy...

:Faraway Dreams:

Chapter Eight:

Fedrich shifted underneath the sheets of his cot, consciousness slowly fighting its way through layers of sleep until it broke free, and his eyes opened to meet the early morning sunlight. Grumbling lightly, he sat up and rubbed his face, fingers coursing through his thin locks of hair and pushing them out of his eyes.

And another morning comes to greet the weary minded hero...

Finally awake enough to move, he swung his legs out to stand up, then shuffled to his dresser and picked out his clothing and weapon for the afternoon before leaving the bedroom for the front room. Already the other Regulators were present, most of them looking very awake despite the early morning hour.

“Morning, everyone.” The Burman greeted.

“Good morning, Fedrich!” Ruthy replied.

“You know, you’re far too cheery in ‘ta mornin’.” Gerick muttered.

“And you’re a positive grump until you get your precious coffee.” She reprimanded.

“Aw, give me a break, woman.” Gerick shot back.

“Can neither of you maintain any civility?” Gordan asked.

“No.” The two replied.

Fedrich chuckled, walking to the coffeepot to pour a cup of the caffeinated beverage. Sipping the drink slowly, his mind drifted back to the thoughts that occupied his previous few days.

So far there have been four other incidents involving that Fire Bandit, damages limited to injured Guards and stolen property. A warrant for his capture was declared yesterday, and the city itself has offered a ten thousand Gil reward for bringing him in to the Security headquarters. I wonder what this bandit is intent on doing? For someone with that kind of power, simple thievery seems like a waste of his talent. There must be something more to this... someone else behind the scenes, maybe...

“Fedrich!” A voice shouted, bringing the Burman around.

“Huh?” He asked, looking at Gerick resting by the door.

“You might wanna finish up yer coffee and get moving, else they’re gonna leave you behind!”

“Right, sorry!” He sputtered, swallowing the last of the brew and placing the mug back onto the table.

The Burman hurriedly exited the Hall, joining the other three Regulators as they casually headed for the Aircab terminal. Just as he joined up with them, a figure burst into the square, breathing heavily and clutching a rolled piece of parchment. The others

stopped as the figure approached them, soon recognizable as Macky.

“Macky?” Illis spoke.

“Thank goodness I caught you in time!” He gasped, holding up the parchment. “Here! It’s from the head of Castle Security!”

Illis took the scroll and unrolled it, scanning the words and reading it for the benefit of the others.

“Dear and valued members of the Regulator Specialist Team, assuredly you have heard of the recent attacks by a criminal labeled as the Fire Bandit. Normal Security teams have been yet able to halt the efforts of this criminal, and it is becoming a situation that could spiral down into something much worse if the public is panicked any further. Reports from your local representative, Mackenzie, have indicated that the population of monsters around the Lindblum Plateau is at a low, so the Security Council has come to a decision.

“You are hereby given a temporary relief of your duties as Regulators and have been assigned to assist the Security teams in the city to hunt down the Fire Bandit and bring him to justice. The Second Security Division, led by Lizel Hanovev, has been

given the task of covering your efforts in the field, and will do so until this matter is cleared up. The First Security Division's leader, Cecil Greenbel, will be your liaison to the efforts of this special task, and any additional information you may need can be obtained from him or his men. As of today, your orders are as listed: To gather information regarding the Fire Bandit and use it to take him into custody by any means short of unwarranted destruction of public property or life, and also to study the execution of the attacks to see if there is a deeper meaning to his thievery.

“Good luck and good hunting. Serra Sepharim, Chief of Castle Security.”

Illis lowered the message, looking at Macky as he rested on his knees, still breathing deeply from his run.

“So we've been ordered to hunt this bandit down?” She asked.

“Yeah.” He breathed. “Seems like the higher ups don't want to be embarrassed by this anymore. They hope the populace will see our involvement as a positive sign of their willingness to deal with this quick and simple, not as a cover for their present lackings.”

“Sounds like typical politics.” Illis muttered.
“Come on, you look like you’ve been up all night.”

Macky treaded slowly back to the hall, the others in tow. “I was late in another meeting to address this, so I stayed at the castle and I nearly slept through the morning without giving you the notice.”

“Gods in heaven, these meetings really take a lot out of you, huh?” Ruthy inquired.

“Yeah, but its a job.” He grinned, stepping into the Hall. “Better than being some marketplace errand boy.”

“So we’ll have to meet with this Cecil Greenbel to get our information.” Fedrich pondered. “Where exactly is his residence?”

Macky finally fell into a chair. “His men have a meeting and training hall in the Industrial District, just after the Aircab Corporation center down Industrial Way.”

“Well then, it seems like our destination is their Hall rather than the field. Shall we depart?” Gordan asked.

“We don’t all need to go, Gordan.” Illis corrected.
“I’ve been thinking about this guy, and it looks like

if we get into a serious battle with him, we'll need to be ready. Ruthy, could you go to the Business District and pick up some potions and the like?"

"Sure thing, Sis." Ruthy accepted.

"Would you accompany her?" Illis asked of Fedrich.

"No problem." Fedrich agreed.

"Gerick, you up to going along with us to meet Cecil Greenbel?" Illis asked.

"Sure!" He exclaimed. "I'm more than willin' to get some exercise."

"Alright, then we shall all reconvene here at noon." Gordan finalized.

"Okay. See you all later!" Ruthy exclaimed, Fedrich following her energetic trail.

"Well well, it's nice to meet you all." A tall blonde called, offering a hand. "The name's Cecil Greenbel, although I'm sure the Lady Chief already mentioned me."

Gerick accepted the grip. "That she did, and 'tis good to meet you. The name's Gerick MacDougal, but Gerick'll do fine."

“Alright then, I might as well get to the point. You all know that some bastard aptly named the Fire Bandit has been stealing stuff left and right while torching anything in his path, especially my guards. Now I’ve been thinking of a plan to bait this guy into a trap, but the Lady Chief decided to bring you in to help out, which makes things easier for me.”

Cecil stepped over to a large table, a map of the Business District sprawled across its surface. He tapped the map where a red pin was placed.

“We’ve managed to locate all the places the Bandit’s attacked, but so far there’s no kind of pattern to be seen, and the only constant is that he hits the target in the late afternoon. I’ve been telling my men to keep a sharp eye out for him and to stay apart so his spells won’t hurt more than one man, but nothing seems to work good enough.”

“Have you tried long range attacks?” Illis asked.

“Tried it, but that damn bastard has the luck of demons on his side. We’ve been close, but not a single arrow has impaled his worthless hide.”

“We had the same luck.” Illis muttered.

“So what options does that leave us? We cannot attack him from a distance due to his uncanny

maneuverability, and he uses magic to repel anyone attempting a close range attack. His defenses seem to be impervious.” Gordan wondered.

“And that’s the damn problem!” Cecil cursed. “None of my men have been able to attack him from any range, he’s just too freakin’ powerful with those spells!”

“There has to be a way around that magic of his.” Illis sighed, rubbing her hands together. “We were able to avoid his attack spell, so at least they aren’t completely unavoidable. The question is how can we use that against him?”

“How often could he cast those spells?” Cecil tried. “Maybe a rush while he’s gathering strength could work.”

“I don’t know. He could cast two spells one after another for all we know.”

“Then maybe you could separate and try to attack him from different sides...” Cecil suggested. “If we could find a place to ambush him, then you could rush him from all sides and get him while he’s focusing on other people!”

“It is possible, but what if he uses a warp spell to get away?” Gordan countered.

Cecil grumbled, thinking for a moment. “It’s a risk we’d have to take, all or nothing.”

“Well where do ‘ya plan on trappin’ this Bandit?” Gerick asked.

Cecil pointed to another spot on the map. “This is one of the high end business areas of the District, known for its jewelers and exotic clothing. If I were a bandit, this place would be a prime target to hit. The best thing is that there are only two ways out of that street, so if we surrounded him, then we could rush him from both sides.”

“It sounds like a good idea.” Illis concurred. “But you said he struck random targets, right? How could we find a way to get him there?”

“I’ll work my men’s schedules around so that any other place is too secure to risk an attack. We’ll have to use that area as bait to get him, there’s no other way around it. After that, all we need to do is predict when he would strike this area, close in around him and *wham!*” Cecil declared, putting hand to fist. “We’ll attack from both sides and strike him down before he knows what happened!”

The morning air was chilly, the morning sunlight just beginning to show itself from behind the

massive walls of Lindblum Grand Castle. People were just beginning to start their morning, and the two Regulators hoped the shops would be open to make use of.

“So what will we need to buy?” Fedrich asked.

“Obviously some potions, maybe even some high potions if his spells are as powerful as they look.” Ruthy estimated. “I don’t think we would need anything else, unless you have any ideas?”

Fedrich shook his head. “Not at the moment.”

Ruthy sighed. “It seems like this guy is going to be a lot of trouble for us. I’ve never had to fight a human with this kind of power before...”

“Worried?”

“Sure I am, this could end badly for us.”

“Still though, its going to be just one man against four of us, plus whatever men Cecil can gather. The odds are in our favor this time.”

“But you saw what he could do!” She reiterated. “Those fireballs could drop any one of us in one hit, and would it be worth those lives to stop him?”

“If he continued attacking innocent people unstopped, sooner or later someone is going to be killed. We’ve got to stop him now so no one else gets hurt.”

Ruthy didn’t reply to his words, and Fedrich was willing to let her mull over his words. The two remained silent for the walk to the Aircab terminal and boarded an airship for the Business District. After a few minutes of flying through the open air of Lindblum, the Aircab landed in the appropriate terminal, and the two continued their silent walk to the shops in the market. People were already waiting for customers, a few early risers taking to the streets to do their part.

Ruthy sighed, staring into the cloudy skies. “You know, sometimes I wonder how you can stay so optimistic in spite of all the dangers we face.”

“It beats just moping around acting like the world’s gonna end.” Fedrich stated, looking at the redhead woman. “One of the key lessons of study to become a Dragon Knight is learning how to overcome sadness and focus on the better aspects of any situation. If a Knight were to be depressed in battle, there would be no way he could fight a battle to his limit!”

“True.” Ruthy seceded.

“And wasn’t it you who said that one couldn’t fight monsters with a sour attitude? How is this any different?”

Ruthy stopped her walk and thought for a moment, Fedrich stopping as well to look at her as she mused over his words. A few seconds later, she looked back at him with a small smile gracing her lips.

“Once again you’ve managed to prove a point, Fedrich. There’s no reason to worry about things when I know you and everyone else will be alongside me, and I couldn’t hope for anything better.”

“There now, you see?” Fedrich smiled back. “Things will work out for the better with that mindset.”

“Okay then, let’s keep going.” She motioned.

* * *

“Thank the Gods Gerick gets the potent stuff.” Macky yawned, setting down a third mug of the bitter coffee.

“Why? Too dependent on the caffeine?” A mystery voice questioned.

“Who in-!” Macky sputtered, turning in his chair to find a person standing in the doorjamb of the Hall. “Who’re you?”

“I just have one question to ask... actually, more like two. This the Regulator’s Hall, yes?”

“Yeah, what business do you have with us?” Macky questioned, sensing something wrong with the situation.

“Not us, but whom. Do you know where your member Illis Killjoy is?”

Macky stood up finally, ignoring the sleepiness in his body. “First tell me what your business is here.”

The man grew angered. “Look, you miserable peasant, just answer my question!”

Macky was surprised at the malice in the man’s voice, his hands clenched in fists at his side and his eyes nearly aflame with inner emotions. The Regulator’s representative grew even more worried, eyes glancing around to locate anything that could defend himself if a battle ensured.

“Well?” The man pressed.

“I won’t be telling the likes of you! Why don’t you leave me to my work?”

The man at the door growled, throwing a hand out and barking mystic words and ending with a familiar phrase. Instantly the tabletop was awash in flame, coffee and foods turned to ash in a seconds time. Macky looked at the table, then back at the man, and recognition immediately entered his head and the identity of the man was known to him.

“You’re the-!”

“The so named Fire Bandit? Yes, and if you value your life as it is, you will tell me when Illis comes here!”

Macky backed away from the man, hoping that he could find a weapon. “What do you want with her?”

“She did something that upset me beyond words, and I’m intent on letting her know that I don’t appreciate being crossed.” The Bandit growled.

Macky was quick to know the man’s meaning. “Don’t think that we’ll let you have your way with her. If you do so much as rearrange a hair on her head, I’ll!—”

“Don’t speak out of line!” The Bandit asked. “You’ve helped as much as your limited intellect can, now accept your payment!”

With a flair of his hand and another chant of words, a fireball exploded across Macky’s body and threw the man against the wall of the main room. The Regulator slumped to the floor, his clothes charred and his body red with burns, consciousness barely present.

“Do you like it?” The fiery mage asked. “Next time don’t push my patience, it isn’t my strong suit.”

Macky just mumbled under his breath, words unable to form in his mouth.

“I see. When and if you come around, please tell Illis that Elric the Fire Bandit is here to collect,” The Bandit asked, leaving the Hall. “And have a nice day.”

Shortly after Elric left, Macky finally struggled to move, his chest burning with pain. He knew that Illis would be in great danger if the Fire Bandit ever caught her off guard or alone. Even with the entire group of Regulators present, Macky still didn’t think they could match the kind of power the Bandit just displayed. Trying to ignore the burns across his

body, the wounded man growled with effort to force himself to a stand, hands supporting him against the wall.

“Dammit... I gotta... get help...” He muttered.

Macky stumbled forward, falling onto the burnt table, his breathing ragged as each rise and fall of his chest sent waves of pain across his entire form. Making a final effort, he got to his feet and tried to run for the door, legs sluggish and numb. He broke into the early morning sunlight as he collapsed for the last time, his energy unable to concentrate through his wounds. He looked to his side, eyes barely making out the form of someone running to his side, and he sighed wistfully.

I gotta hope that Illis finds me before Elric finds her...

Chapter Nine

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Enjoy...

:Faraway Dreams:

Chapter Nine:

“Who could have done this!?” Illis asked angrily of the people around her. “What kind of person could attack an unarmed man so easily!?”

“Illis, please remain calm. We all know that only the Fire Bandit is responsible for this.”

“But why? Why would a mere bandit decide to attack someone so viscously and not steal anything? It makes no sense!”

“Please, Illis, stop asking questions that cannot be answered!” Gordan begged, placing his hands across her shoulders and looking into her eyes. “There are answers to be found, but not until we gather more information from Mackenzie when he wakes. Until then, do not torture yourself by seeking the unseekable.”

Illis was surprised at Gordan’s words, but she calmed down and gave a weak nod. “Okay.”

Gordan stepped back, then crossed his arms and glanced over at the window to the Medical Hall, seeing the afternoon sunlight through the layers of clouds covering the sky. The day was just beginning, and already they had suffered a casualty to their newly ordered mission. Gordan’s brow furrowed, wondering if the attack was sheer coincidence, or if the Bandit somehow learned of the Regulators involvement and made a preemptive attack to weaken their moral. A door at the end of the waiting room opened, and a familiar doctor walked in with a quiet motion.

“How is he, Doctor Harris?” Ruthy asked first.

“He’s in good shape despite the burns, but he’s pretty tired from all the healing herbs we gave him. He’ll pull through in a few days, although it will

take much longer for the wounds to heal completely.”

“Can we see him?” Illis tried, Gerick standing to follow.

The Doctor scrunched up his face. “Not all of you at once, he needs to stay relaxed! I’ll let two of you in and the rest can wait ’till tomorrow.”

“Thank you.” Illis nodded, heading for the door with Gerick at her side.

The two passed through the door and were presented with a large room, medical equipment and paraphernalia scattered across the tables. Resting on a bed in the center of the room was Macky, his chest wrapped in bandages and his face wrinkled with exhaustion. He looked at the door to see his visitors, and smiled lightly when recognizing them.

“Hey... what’s up?” Macky asked.

“Not much at all.” Gerick muttered. “Although it looks like you’ve been through some kinda hell.”

“You could say that...” He grinned, looking at Illis. “I’m glad that you’re here, though...”

“Why?”

“The Bandit, he wanted to know where you were... this morning. I didn’t tell him, and he did this to me. He wanted me to tell you... that ‘Elric the Fire Bandit is here to collect’...”

Illis’ face registered shock and fear, her body motionless as the words sunk in.

Oh no... what is he doing here? Why did he come to get me after all these years?...

“Illis?” Gerick started.

“Huh?” She breathed, looking back at the elder man.

“You okay? It looks like ’ta devil danced on your grave.”

“I’m fine... it’s just that I remember than name from my past...”

Gerick was surprised. “You mean you know this guy!?”

Illis frowned. “More like I knew him from a long time ago. He was nothing... nothing more than an acquaintance. But why did he come here after so long and attack my friend... Tell me, what did he looks like?”

“He was tall, a bit shorter than you, Gerick. Thin looking guy through his wide shirt, and he had short red hair, green eyes, maybe brown. He seemed really pissed about something when he came,” Macky added. “He said that you crossed him, and that he wasn’t going to let it slide so easily. Illis, what kind of person *is* he?”

“I already said he was just an old friend, but he was never so bold as to do this... or strong enough to...” She spoke, musing on her past. “I imagine he would be upset after I left, but he isn’t the type to do something this evil just for revenge, and it’s been so many years since then...”

“Well it seems time hasn’t lessened whatever you did, Illis.” Gerick frowned, rubbing his beard. “It sounds like the guy’s gotta bone ’ta pick with you, and he’s too strong for you to fight if it boils down to that.”

“That’s pretty obvious.” She replied.

“So what are you gonna do?” Macky asked.

Illis remained silent, unable to think of anything that could help. The Fire Bandit was a powerful enemy, and it seemed that his focus was no longer solely on thievery and fighting the Guards. She had

been away from him for so long, yet he was able to find her only after a week of residence in Lindblum. If he was able to track her so easily, then she feared that his efforts would hurt even more of her friends.

“I... don’t know...” She finally uttered.

Gerick was quick to speak. “Well, it’s obvious that you’re not gonna be safe here if he’s out ’ta get you, despite your own power. I wouldn’t put it past ’im to find out where ’ya live and try to get you there.”

“What would you do, though? I can’t ask you all to follow me everywhere and wait for him.”

“Then what *would* you have us do?”

Illis’ gaze hardened. “He’s going to come for me sometime, so we need to get him first, and we can do that by using Cecil Greenbel’s plan as soon as possible. That’s the only time we’ll have the advantage over him.”

“Alright then.” Gerick began, crossing his arms. “I’ll head back to the Armory and let Cecil know what’s goin’ down. Hopefully, he’ll be willin’ to push the plan ahead so we’ll not waste any time gettin’ this guy off your back. You should go home

'an rest yourself, but I'll have 'ta insist that Gordan and Fedrich go with ya for safety's sake."

"Okay." She agreed.

"Well then, Macky, I guess we'll be leavin' you to the Docs. Hope you get through alright."

"Thanks for coming you two, I'll be back before you know it, or maybe before the Doctors know." He grinned.

Gerick laughed. "I'll be waitin'!"

The two left the room and went back to the others, all of them standing to hear whatever news they had.

"How is he?" Ruthy asked.

"Macky's doin' fine, but he have more problems to deal with." Gerick warned. "It turns out that 'ta Fire Bandit's, who we now know as Elric, is after Illis for somethin' she did a long time ago."

The people present were all shocked, Gordan most of all.

"Good Gods, Illis, what kind of thing did you do to upset a man of his power?" He asked.

“He wasn’t that powerful when I knew him! It’s been so long since he ever saw me, that there has to be some other reason he’s come after me.”

“Whatever reason that may be, I will not allow him to harm you!” Gordan declared.

“Well, that’s the general plan.” Gerick agreed. “I’m insistin’ that you ‘n Fedrich walk her home just in case.”

“Alright, but are you sure she’ll be safe at home?” Fedrich asked.

“No, I’m not, but at ’ta moment, it’s the only place that can offer her the most protection.”

“Then we should depart and get her home as soon as possible as well as Ruthy. At the rate this Elric is moving, there is no telling how long it will be until he attempts to confront Illis with whatever accusations he has.”

“Okay, I’ll be goin’ to meet with Cecil. See ya all later.”

“Are you sure that you will be safe at home, Illis?” Gordan asked.

“For the last time, I’ll be fine! There’s no way that Elric could find my home out of the thousands

of others here, and even if he does, I'm not completely defenseless against him and his magic.”

“Don’t worry so much, Gordan, I’ll make sure no one messes with my sister and gets away with it.” Ruthy added.

Gordan sighed, rubbing his head. “You know I ask merely out of concern for your safety. I would not be able to forgive myself if I let him injure you and I was not around to stop him.”

Illis rested a hand on his shoulder. “I appreciate the thoughts, but I’m hardly the defenseless maiden. Gerick’s gonna need your help finding this guy more than me.”

With a not so gentle shove, she pushed the nobleman back towards the door. “Now why don’t you go out and relax, you’ve been stressing yourself too much for a single day.”

“But-!”

Illis raised a hand to silence him, then reached into a pocket and flipped a fifty Gil coin to Fedrich. “Fedrich, go get him something to drink or his head’s going to explode.”

The Burman grinned. “Yes, Ma’am.”

“And make sure it’s something with a lot of alcohol!” She added.

“Okay!”

Fedrich gripped the nobleman’s shoulder and lead him out of the house, closing the door with a gentle latching of the handle. Illis sighed happily and fell into a chair, resting her head against her arms as she studied the ceiling.

“He’s certainly devoted to you, huh?” Ruthy asked with a smile.

“Ah, he’s just being old fashioned, thinking ladies aren’t able to protect themselves.”

“I think it’s cute that he does all that for you, though.”

“Yeah, he does every little thing he can to make things easier, but I’m sure he’s just trying to revive his failed reputation as a prominent noble of the Lindblum upper crust.”

“You sure about that? He seems really attached to you out of everyone else.”

Illis looked down at her sister, the younger redhead leaning against a wall. “What do you mean by that?”

“Well, I mean, he acts proper and nice to the ladies he meets, but he practically falls over his feet trying to do everything he can for you. Don’t you think that’s a little much more than just being polite?”

“So... you think he’s got something for me?” Illis asked.

“Well, he certainly acts like it sometimes.” Ruthy replied with a smirk.

“Huh...” She muttered, looking back to the ceiling with a reflective expression. “I suppose there is some truth to that, but I never really considered it to be anything more than just being nice to me because of my past.”

“Maybe you ought to think about it more, then.” Ruthy suggested.

Illis nodded, then looked back at her sister with her arms crossed over her lap. “Perhaps, but why did you bother to bring this up?”

Ruthy raised an eyebrow. “I just think that if Gordan does have a thing for you, then maybe you should look into it. We’ve both been through a lot since we left home, and I just want to see my big sister happy.”

“Well, why don’t you ever look for someone to be with, eh?” Illis asked with a grin, reversing the situation.

Ruthy blushed immediately. “Hey, I don’t know many guys, and none of them show any sign of liking me more than friends!”

“Cheap excuse, sister!” Illis laughed. “I’m sure there are a lot of nice guys who’d fall for you.”

“But I don’t know where they’re all hiding.” She countered.

“Why not try the places you’re around?”

Ruthy made a face. “Yeah right! All the men in the Regulators are too old, and the others are too dull or too weird!”

“What about Fedrich? He looks about your age.” Illis pondered.

“Now that’s just wrong! He’s a demi-human, I’m a regular human, there’s no way that could ever work!”

“Who says it can’t?”

Ruthy was about to reply, but the words died in her mouth as her mind thought it out. Illis stood up

from her chair and walked by Ruthy, patting the youth's head, getting her attention.

"Give it some thought. You two seem to get along well enough, so what's there to stop you?"

Ruthy was going to speak, but Illis walked away and headed up the small flight of stairs to their bedrooms, cutting her off. Ruthy got to her feet and walked to the small window by their front door, looking out into the open expanse of the Lindblum skyline. She recalled the times that they were together, and she did find that he was nice around her and that they did have things in common.

...Who says it can't?...

"Fedrich's a nice person... but could such a thing really work between two different people?"

Chapter Ten

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Enjoy...

:Faraway Dreams:

Chapter Ten:

“Hey, you seen anyone suspicious?” A guard asked his comrade.

“Nope.” The other replied.

“You remember his description, right?”

“Nope.”

“Wha-? Geez, you really don’t do anything your suppose to, huh?”

“Nope.”

“Don’t you have anything else to say?”

“Nope.”

“If you say nope again, I’m gonna wallop you with my hammer!”

“Hey, does that guy look like him?”

“Huh?”

“Him. Is that guy him?” The guard pointed.

The two looked out into the crowd, finding a man milling around a small fountain. The first guard smacked the other across his pointed helmet.

“Idiot! That’s the silk merchant’s son!”

“Sorry!” The other whined.

“I don’t see how you keep forgetting things!”

“My doctor said I had a bad memory!”

“Then why did you join the First Division?”

“First Division? This isn’t the Second Division?”

The first guard smacked his forehead. “How clueless are you!?”

Before the other guard could reply, a fireball exploded in the center of a jewelry stand, knocking aside the people nearby. A figure dressed in billowing clothes took off down the street, a large bag trailing his body.

“Hey, that’s him!” The guard shouted, running after the man.

The Bandit stopped running and looked around, seeing the two guards in pursuit. He moved his arm around and chanted a spell, then threw his hand out and cast a fire spell that knocked them back. After seeing that the two were unable to continue, he restarted his sprint for freedom on the main Business Street. The first guard struggled to move, but fell to his back in pain.

“Damn... him...”

“That must... have been him...” The other commented.

The first sighed. “Smack... yourself... idiot...”

“There he goes!” Cecil shouted. “Don’t let him get past the blockade!”

The leader of the First Security Division continued running as fast as his legs could carry

him, the Regulators at his heels, weapons drawn and ready to attack. The Bandit kept running, not stopping to cast any spells, much to the relief of his pursuers.

“Dammit, we’re not gonna stop him in time!” Illis swore.

“Screw this, Burman!” Cecil barked.

“Yeah!?” Fedrich answered.

“You’ve got those legs! Use them and stall him!”

“Right!”

Fedrich slowed down, then used his natural strength to leap into the skies, flying ahead of the others and closer to the Bandit. After several leaps, the Burman landed in front of the Fire Bandit and drew his short sword, shouting a command.

“Stop where you are, Elric!!” He shouted.

The fiery haired bandit stopped in his tracks, and he looked ahead at the voice that dared him. Neutral brown eyes met fierce blue, and the Burman frowned as the bandit simply laughed at his effort.

“You’re actually telling me to stop by my name? How daring of you!” The bandit commented.

“Don’t take me so lightly! Surrender yourself.” Fedrich again demanded.

The bandit laughed again, which made the Burman hesitate. “I remember you... you tried to stop me before at the Hunter’s Gate. You must be one of those pesky little Regulators.”

“Yes, and this time I won’t let you get away!”

“Goodness, it’s been a while since I’ve had a stalker. Most people know not to mess with the Fire Bandit.”

“Well, then I guess I don’t go along with most people.” Fedrich joked.

The Bandit laughed again, tugging on his leather gloves while putting a smug grin on his face. He slung the pouch across his body, then began focusing his power.

“Alright then, let’s see what you’ve got!”

Elric brought up his right arm, and a sparkle of magical energy ran across his body and focused into his palm while he chanted a mantra. With a flourish of fingers, he thrust his arm forwards and shouted out a final word to realize the spell.

“Fire!!”

A ball of fire exploded to life in front of Fedrich, then roared into an inferno that engulfed the area nearby in blistering red heat. He lowered his hand, looking at the scorched earth and finding no remains of the Burman Regulator. Without hesitating any longer, he quickly jumped forwards and rolled several feet away from his original location. Fedrich, having avoided the fiery blast, slammed his short sword into the cobblestone instead of the bandit's body.

"A good idea, provided your enemy is a stupid one." The bandit commented.

"Why you...!" The Burman cursed, scrambling to his feet and dashing for the bandit.

The bandit quickly summoned his strength, and he cast another fire spell at the approaching Fedrich. However, the demi-human again leapt into the air, avoiding the second fireball with obvious ease.

"Quick bastard..." The bandit swore, watching as the Burman landed without harm.

"Not so tough, are we?" He mocked.

"You avoid my attacks and think the battle is won? You've only guaranteed yourself a place in hell!"

The bandit reached back and gripped something hidden under his large shirt, pulling sharply and revealing the polished, deadly length of a broadsword. With a growl of anger, he jumped to action and charged the Burman, who replied in kind. The two blades struck one another, a loud squeal of metal sounding from the impact. After the first strike, the bandit went on the offensive to keep the Regulator off balance, who could only hold his ground and block each attack. With a move that strained his arms, Elric swung down at the burman, and their swords hit one another and locked together.

The two pressed their blades against the other, a stalemate until one moved his sword away.

“You’re strong...” Fedrich muttered, eyes locked onto the bandit’s.

“I’d say the same of you...” The bandit started.

Suddenly an arrow whistled by, and Fedrich looked to see Ruthy standing ready with her longbow drawn. Elric looked around, seeing the Regulators and Cecil at one end of the street, a horde of Lindblum Guards at the other. The Bandit looked at Fedrich, and the Burman was grinning widely.

“You stalled me...”

“A smart one, too!” Fedrich laughed.

Elric growled, then used all his strength to shove the Burman back. Quickly chanting, he cast a small fire spell in front of the Burman to halt any attacks, and the Bandit took off running towards the line of Guards. Sheathing his blade, he lifted his arms up and began chanting once again, sparkling magical essence traveling across his body and building at his hands for several seconds. Another arrow pierced the air, but the Bandit managed to avoid being impaled, despite never seeing the projectile. After avoiding the attack, he threw his arms forwards and bellowed out another spell.

“Firaga!!”

A fireball, much larger than any before, formed at the center of the Guard blockade and exploded with a violent roar. Dozens of men were thrown out from the epicenter, many more sent to the ground from the shock of the explosion. Cecil and the others stood in mute surprise, seeing their plan ruined before their eyes. Fedrich was quick to overcome the pain the previous fire spell etched into his torso and again gave pursuit.

“Elric! Stop!” Fedrich shouted.

The Bandit turned to face the approaching Burman. “Sorry, Burman, but I’m a busy man. Give Illis my regards.”

With a quick motion, Elric lifted his arms up and began chanting, preparing a warp spell to escape. Fedrich doubled his effort, sword out and ready, praying that he would reach the Bandit before he cast the spell. Just as Elric thrust his arms out to his sides, Fedrich leapt forward and thrust his sword out to strike him down. A blinding light blotted out Fedrich’s sight, but the Burman could feel his sword pierce the air instead of flesh, and the cobblestone scraping his chest only reinforced that idea. A few moments later, the sound of footsteps came from behind, and Fedrich pushed himself to his feet.

“Fedrich! Are you okay!?” He heard Ruthy cry.

“I’m alright...” He muttered in return, turning back to see the Regulators rushing to his side.

“God *damn*, boy!” Cecil shouted with a grim smile. “Gerick told me you were quick to fight, but I’ve never seen anyone rush that fast into battle with a guy like that!”

“That’s because his thick head doesn’t know any better!” Illis declared.

“Well, that thick head managed to give him a good fight!” Cecil praised. “I never thought that anyone could get close enough to fight him!”

The Regulators and the Security Captain arrived by Fedrich, and Ruthy was quick to approach the wounded Burman with healing medication in hand. Her face widened in surprise once she saw the numerous scrapes and burns covering Fedrich’s chest, his vest burnt and useless.

“Gods, Fedrich, you look terrible!”

“It’s not that bad.” He boasted, looking at his injuries with a careful eye.

“Here,” She spoke, forcing two potions on him. “Take some of these anyway.”

“Alright.” He accepted, taking them into his hands.

“Do your men need any help, Captain Cecil?” She asked, looking back at the blonde officer. “That fireball looked powerful enough to take out a building!”

He smiled and waved her off. “Nah, but thanks anyway, kiddo. My men are more than able to care for themselves.”

“Okay then.”

Cecil looked around, seeing the others with grim expressions. “Come on now, we just gave that bastard the scare of his life! He’ll think twice before trying to attack us again!”

“But we still allowed him to escape.” Gordan grumbled. “If anything else, he will know that he cannot toy with us any longer, and will not hold back. You saw his power, he was able to defeat your Guards, fifty strong, with a single spell! If he has such a power as readily usable, there is no hope for us to avoid it if he sees it in his benefit to cast it on us!”

“Yet he still is gonna know—”

“Dammit, Cecil, he wiped out a squadron of your men with a flick of his wrist and wasn’t even slowed down!” Illis swore. “How can you be so damned optimistic when we didn’t even stop him from carrying out another robbery! Now he’s going to know that even your best men and the Regulators *combined* aren’t a match for him! What’s to stop him from attacking more often!?”

Cecil’s expression fell, the sad truth of the situation piling into his mind.

“Well then, we’d best try and think of another plan!” Gerick spoke up. “Never mind that he’s a strong bugger, we’ve gotta find another way to stop him!”

“Then what would you recommend!?” Cecil growled. “I’ve done the best I can with the people I have! What else do you people expect from me!?”

The Regulators looked at the Captain with surprise in their faces. Cecil was normally a optimistic and mind tempered man, and his sudden outburst revealed a different side to him that seemed foreign to him. He shook his fists at his side, frustration running its course and leaving behind even more stress than he had.

“I’ve tried everything I know to stop him, but he just overcomes any obstacle I create! Damned if I admit it... but he’s just on a level that me and my men can’t compete with...”

“Then what can we do?” Fedrich asked.

“I don’t know, I’ve exhausted all my ideas.” Cecil sighed.

“Look now, Cecil.” Gerick added, patting the officer’s shoulder. “You’ve done yer best, and that’s

nothin' to be ashamed of. Go and take care of yer men, we'll think 'o somethin' in the meanwhile."

Cecil sighed again, but put on a smile for the elder Regulator. "Alright then. You go and think things over and we'll compare notes in a few days."

"Agreed." Gerick grinned.

The Captain gave a salute to his fellow warriors, then jogged away to assist his Guards. Gerick faced his own comrades, each of them holding different expressions of mixed fear and worry, concerns and somber thoughts.

"Well, ladies and gentlemen, we've gotta find ourselves another plan." He addressed. "We'll head back 'ta the Hall for the time being. Fedrich, you'd better get your wounds looked over properly."

"Yeah..." He sighed.

"Don't worry, I'll make sure he's patched up." Ruthy volunteered.

At the Hall, the atmosphere of the Regulators was anything but eager to go into combat as they usually were. With the rising danger the Fire Bandit posed, doubts and fear began to erode the once solid moral foundation the group thrived on. Illis was worried

even more about her friends, Gordan became even more protective of her, willing to part with his own home to guard her from harm, and Gerick was pondering the future of his organization and it's moral. Ruthy was growing worried about the safety of her family and her friends, and Fedrich was continuing to berate himself for his inability to stop people from being harmed.

“You really got burnt bad, Fedrich.” Ruthy assessed. “It’s going to be a while before this all heals over.”

“It’s not that bad.” He denied, shuffling in his chair.

“Oh really?” She asked, poking his tender flesh.

Fedrich immediately winced in pain, hands closing into fists. “Rei’s damnation, that hurt! What was that for!?”

“To prove that you aren’t a good liar.” She smirked, picking up another roll of medical bandages.

Fedrich sighed. “I guess I’m not, but compared to what those Guards must have taken, this is nothing.”

“They can take care of themselves, you know. Cecil said as much.”

“Still, if I wasn’t so slow I could have stopped Elric from casting that spell on them. It’s my fault that they were all injured so badly.”

“No it isn’t.” She scolded. “You did the best you could, and so what if he got away? You did all you could, that’s what counts, and no one else will blame you for it.”

Fedrich struggled for words, but he wasn’t able to find anything to counter her argument. He knew that the fault lied with Elric for attacking them, but he couldn’t shake off the guilt of not being able to help.

“Could you move your arms?” Ruthy asked.

“Huh?”

“Your arms.” She repeated. “I need to bandage your chest.”

“Oh, right.” He muttered sheepishly.

Ruthy took the long strip of bandage and looped it around Fedrich’s torso, keeping it tight to his body as she slowly covered the area of his burns. Fedrich remained silent as she worked, his mind wandering back to the battle.

That Fire Bandit... he seems to enjoy toying with us, as if he thinks we aren't worth his attention. I don't care what kind of power he has, there's always a weakness of any attack, I just need to find it. I swear that I'll make him pay for everything he's done... for causing so much strife for Illis and Ruthy, for everyone...

Ruthy took the last length of bandage and slipped it through the weave of tape, tying it off. “All done!”

“Thanks a lot, Ruthy.” He smiled.

“Next time, though, try not to get hurt so much, okay?” She asked with a sarcastic grin.

“Yes, Ma’am.” He replied, equally sarcastic.

Ruthy stood to leave, picking up the remains of the bandages, but Fedrich stood up for a final word.

“Ruthy?”

She turned back to face him. “Yeah?”

“I just... wanted to thank you for helping me back there.”

She smiled warmly at him. “Sure thing.”

* * * *

Elric felt his body pulse with energy as he warped away from the battle, his nerves blazing with the intense feeling of being manipulated by magical power. Suddenly he felt his form shake and cringe in pain, and he found himself standing in an empty alleyway. Almost as soon as the warp spell ended, he felt his legs give out, and he fell against a wall, short of breath and vision wavering. He let gravity pull him down to the trash littered ground, and he wiped his forehead clear of the sweat that coated it. Reaching into his large shirt, he pulled out a healing potion and an ether and downed them both, tossing the bottles away with a clatter of glass.

“Dammit... I knew it was too risky... to cast that spell and warp right after...” He muttered.

The soothing relief of the potion and ether slowly eased the exhaustion that plagued his body, and after a few minutes of resting prone on the ground, he shoved himself to a stand. He stepped to the edge of the alley and looked around, seeing heavy machinery grinding away in the stonework of the buildings.

“At least I got this far... but I’m gonna have to push it again.”

Elric steadied himself on his feet, then raised his arms up and prepared for another warp. He imagined his destination in his head, putting as much detail into his arrival location before finalizing the spell. His body exploded into torrents of energy, the spell removing his physical form, sending him through the air, and reconstructing him at his destination. Once he returned to normal space, the further strain on his body caused a gasp to escape from his lips, legs going numb and his balance all but gone. With a helpless motion, he fell onto a thick bundle of blankets and quilts lying on the ground, consciousness fleeing from his weary mind. His eyes looked upon the area he slept in, the crates and dust offering a perfect cover for him in the near abandoned catacombs of the theater he hid in.

I'll be sure to get you next time... Illis...

Chapter Eleven

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Enjoy...

:Faraway Dreams:

Chapter Eleven:

“Take this!”

Fedrich leapt into the skies, his short sword raised and ready. With gravity at his side, he dropped to the ground and lashed out at his opponent with incredible strength. Gordan, at the ready, put his hands on the blade to completely absorb the energy of the attack, his knees nearly buckling under the strain. Fedrich landed on the cobblestone of the Square, then jumped back to

avoid a counterattack from Gordan's own broadsword. The two then ran at one another and attacked, swords ringing out and echoing in the walls of the buildings. The two continued their dance, Fedrich taking an aggressive stance and managing to force Gordan back a step, the nobleman surprised at the Burman's actions.

"You seem to have improved your skill somewhat!" Gordan complemented.

"I guess facing a stronger warrior made me realize how little I knew!" Fedrich replied with another clash of swords.

The two continued their duel for a minute, until Gordan lashed out with such ferocity to knock Fedrich off balance and onto his rear. The Burman was about to get up, but the tip of Gordan's blade put itself in front of his eyes, stopping his movement.

"Victory, it seems, belongs to me." The nobleman stated, offering a hand.

"Yeah, same as last time." Fedrich grieved, accepting the assistance.

"You have made some improvements, though. Last time you were reckless to attack, but this time

you knew your strength and tried to force me to adapt, not the opposite way around. That is a sign of experience.”

“Still, you did beat me. I just have to find a way to get stronger, improve my skill so Elric won’t beat me again.”

“It will not benefit you to practice just to beat someone. It is better to have a proper mindset while practicing, so your morals and desires are forged and improved much like your physical strength and skill.”

“What mindset do you mean?”

“It is not part of a Dragon Knight’s duty to protect others and to do your utmost in battle?”

“Yeah.”

“Then you should have those thoughts in your mind as you fight. Is it not better to fight for the protection of all innocents rather than to defeat one sinful individual?”

Fedrich nodded. “Good point.”

“Trust me.” Gordan smiled, patting the Burman on his shoulder. “I have learned that the mind needs

to be trained just as much as the body to make a warrior truly effective.”

“I’ll take your word for it.” Fedrich smirked.

“Fedrich!!” A voice called from the doors of the Hall.

The two swordsmen looked to the source of the voice, seeing Ruthy present with an angry expression.

“Uh oh...” Fedrich squeaked.

Ruthy stormed over to the two, her eyes boring holes into Fedrich’s head. “I thought I told you to rest so your body could heal! What are you doing out here training!?”

Fedrich scrambled to come up with an excuse. “I can’t rest while Elric runs around. Besides, my wounds are healing just fine...”

“That’s hardly a good enough reason to be running around. Your scars won’t heal good if you keep this up.”

“If it’s any relief, I haven’t been doing this more than ten minutes, and I’m done for now.”

“You’re done, alright, and it’ll be that way until I say you’re good and ready!” She declared, gripping the Burman’s arm with a firm hand and pulling him towards the Hall. “Come on, you need to sit back and take things easy.”

Ruthy and an unwilling Fedrich stormed through the Hall doors, sweeping past Illis who was preparing to go out for the afternoon. The dark clothed woman watched as her little sister pulled Fedrich to the small medicine room, breaking into an apologetic grin for the Burman. She continued out into the Square, passing near Gordan.

“Fedrich certainly seems to be a new interest of your sister, Illis.”

“Guess she’s just being overly concerned for him.”

“Ever since Mackenzie was put into the Medical Hall’s care, she seems to be holding more than just friendly concern for him. It is strange to see such a sudden change in her attitude...”

“Maybe she’s just being protective because she’s got a new friend who’s putting himself into more danger than he can handle.”

“Could be...” Gordan mused. “Then again, Fedrich too has gone through changes since his arrival. No longer if he a independent warrior looking for glory, but has switched his motivation to become a defender of the innocent.”

“Yeah, except now he’s thick-headed instead of sensible.”

“Overzealous would fit him better.” Gordan offered with a smirk. “He does not attack without thinking it through beforehand. There is potential for him yet.”

“Well, I hope that he gets better a lot sooner. Elric isn’t going to sit back and let him gloat over his victory for long. Sooner or later Fedrich’s gonna find himself in a fight be may not win. That spell... it uses so much power, nothing could hold against it, not even a fast footed Burman...”

“Is it that strong?”

Illis nodded. “It’s one of the most lethal spells known... thank the Gods he doesn’t know the others...”

Gordan held a confused expression for a moment. “Others?...”

How does she know this kind of information? I've checked through the National Library, and there is barely any information about spells more dangerous than Firaga or its elemental cousins...

“...What other spell could be worse than that horrendous fireball?”

“Flare... Meteor... *Doomsday...*” She intoned. “All are much stronger, too strong for normal people to learn, too powerful for even a Grand Dragon to withstand.”

Gordan felt sweat bead on his forehead from just the thoughts of such devastation.

Dear Gods in heaven, what kind of forces exist to give rise to such power? Worse yet... how does Illis know of such ancient and forgotten knowledge?...

“Illis, how do you know of such things?” He finally asked.

The dark clothed woman hesitated a moment, but donned her mask of indifference and started to walk away. “There are things called books where you can read about it. Why not read up on it, huh?”

“Wait, Illis!”

“I’m going shopping for food, so I’ll see you later.” She replied, ending the conversation.

Gordan’s words died in his mouth, knowing that Illis wouldn’t reveal anything else now that her mind was against it. He thought heavily on her words, remembering that she rarely revealed anything of her past life outside Lindblum. Her hometown, family, friends, they all were unknown to him, as well as their location on the Mist Continent. Her avoidance of her past lead him to believe that there was something between the two deeper than appearances let on.

There are simply too many coincidences to allow for a simple answer. Her knowledge of magic foreign to even the highest of Lindblum scholars. Elric’s ability to conjure such magic to its deadliest strengths. The mere fact that the two know one another from the past is enough to raise suspicions...

Gordan ran a hand through his hair. “What connection is there between Illis Killjoy and Elric the Fire Bandit?...”

“Now you get some rest, okay?” The redhead ordered.

“Alright, already!” Fedrich whined. “You’ve made your point more than clear, okay?”

Ruthy nodded. “Good, ’cause if I see you up and exerting yourself today, I’ll see that you won’t be able to move for a week!”

“Yes, Ruthy...” He replied.

The redhead gave a smile. “I’m doing this for your benefit, though, so please don’t be so upset.”

“Okay.”

“Right, then see you later.” She spoke, closing the door to Fedrich’s small room.

The Burman fell back onto his cot, sighing heavily as he tried to think through her behavior. At first meeting, she seemed cocky and arrogant about her knowledge of scavenging monsters. Afterwards she was sociable to him whenever they met, and he began enjoying the time he spent with her. However, he couldn’t understand why she became so protective of him to the point of dictating his daily routine.

She’s changed, that’s definitely true, but because of what? Ever since Macky was put into the Medical Hall, Ruthy’s been on edge for everyone safety, mine

especially. Maybe it's because the threat of her friends being hurt from something in the city, not in the field, that got her like this...

Fedrich shifted on the cot, putting his arms behind his head to stare blankly at the upper corner of his room, observing a few wispy strands of cobwebs gently sway with the weak breeze from outside. He brought up mental images of the Bandit, Elric, wondering what the man wanted with Illis, why he attacked a friend of hers to get a message across. His thoughts gravitated back to Ruthy, wondering just what was making the younger redhead so worried.

I swear... I'll find that Bandit and make him pay...

Ruthy sighed once she closed Fedrich's door, looking up towards the ceiling of the hall. Despite her best efforts to try to be conscious of the needs of her friends, she still knew that her efforts to keep them safe came off as stronger than normal. She found herself getting even more worried than normal, something she attributed to the arrival of the Fire Bandit and his mysterious connection to her sister. Then there was Fedrich, the Burman offering her a refreshing change of pace with his friendly

attitude, but at the same time complicating matters even more than they were.

...Who says it can't?...

Why did Illis ever suggest such a thing? How could a human and a Burman ever come as close as she thinks? We are of two separate races, the two couldn't ever be together so intimately...

She began a slow pace towards the main room of the Hall, her mind still running.

But what she said... does she believe that there truly is nothing separating different races from interacting like that? It's been said that what's on the inside counts... but can the same thing apply?

“You look worried, Ruthy.” A voice commented.

The redhead was surprised at the sound, snapping out of her thoughts to see Gerick sitting on a chair with a mug in his hand. She felt her face blush, and she quickly thought of excuses to use.

“I’m just... scared about my sister being stalked by that Bandit...”

“Ah, that’s understandable. You don’t need ’ta worry so much, your sister’s in good hands with us ’n Gordan at her side, you know that.”

“I do.” She argued. “But that Elric is just so strong, I don’t know what I would do if he attacked us with that magic again. I wish there was some way to stop him from using it, or some kind of protection we could get.”

“Ya got a point, ’cept that we don’t have either of those. Only powerful healers know spells to silence him and to make barriers fer protection, something Lindblum doesn’t have much of.”

Ruthy moaned in despair. “Gods, it seems like we’re doomed to fail!”

“Now don’t you go get all worried,” Gordan spoke with a grin. “I’ll go all the way ’ta Alexandria ’n drag their General Beatrix down ’ere by her hair before I give up!”

Ruthy forced a snicker out. “She’d bust you up even before you got there. It would be nice if we had someone as famous as her to help, but we’ll just have to make due with what we have.”

“There ’ya go, we’ll get ’im before he knows it!”

Ruthy grinned back at the bearded man. “Thanks for the talk, Gerick. I’m just gonna have to face up to my fears when it comes.”

“Yep.”

“Well, I’m going out for a while, so I’ll see you later.”

The sun was beginning its descent behind the massive walls of Lindblum, the clouds in the sky beginning to gain the reddish pink hue of the evening hours. Ruthy, tired from an afternoon of window shopping, walked through the front door of her small home, and she was immediately thrown off guard by the presence of someone least expected.

“Elric!?” She blurted, spying her sister standing nearby. “What are you doing here!”

“Calm down, Ruthy!” Illis quickly ordered, hoping her sibling would comply.

Ruthy felt her fingers curl in anticipation of drawing her dagger, her longbow not available. She glared at Elric, the older man standing idly with a casual expression on his face instead of an angry one.

“I’ll calm down as soon as you explain what the hell he’s doing in our house!!” She demanded.

“Relax, kid.” Elric sighed. “Jeez, you take after Illis more than I wished...”

Elric's statement threw Ruthy off balance. "What do you mean by that!?"

"Just let me explain it! She'd never believe anything you say, anyway." Illis motioned her sister to a chair. "I'd sit down for this."

Ruthy, still cautious about an enemy in her home, took the chair farthest from Elric and sat down. Illis sighed and leaned her head back, looking at the ceiling as if any divine inspiration would help her explain away Elric's presence.

"Alright, you know that you weren't born in Lindblum, and that our home is in a faraway village to the east. I'm sure you don't remember all the events that lead to me leaving there, taking you with me.

"Our village is called Ulura, and has been an isolated region for a long time. What makes this place so special is that almost everyone there knows magic in its various forms, specifically each of the four basic elements: fire, earth, wind, and water. Those four elements are easy for our people to master, but there is a magic that is difficult to learn, and is only known by one lineage in the entire village."

“Ours?” Ruthy asked.

“Yep. That magic happens to be white magic, spells that can heal or harm, depending on the need. Our mother knows white magic, and so do you and I, at least instinctively. To be able to use this magic, people have to go through harsh training for many years. However, there are some people that go an extra step, going through several years more to attain a special title, ‘Guardian’. A Guardian is someone who has complete mastery of a certain element, and there is only one per elemental type. Since our family is the only one that knows white magic, it was necessary for us to go through the training to master it.”

“So why didn’t we? Why did you decide to leave and take me with you?”

Illis ran a hand through her hair. “White magic is very fickle in who can use it. Only the women of our family can use it, so that would mean that both of us would’ve gone through the training to master it.”

“...And?” Ruthy asked, looking confused.

“Don’t you see what that would mean? We would become the new Guardians of white magic, and be forced to have families and raise the next generation

of white magic users! Staying in Ulura would have meant that we would never be able to leave!”

Ruthy’s eyes widened, finally understanding what Illis was explaining.

“So you understand why I had no choice but to take you with me.”

“You just were making sure to leave no liabilities behind!” Elric shouted.

Illis looked back at the man, her expression burning with anger. “I was making sure that my sister wouldn’t become a prisoner of her own people!”

“You were avoiding your born destiny!”

“I was freeing myself to make my own destiny and make my own life!”

Ruthy looked between the two arguing people, her mind working to try and figure out why the two seemed to know a lot about the other.

Illis and Elric both seem to be stubborn beyond reasoning. They look almost the same height, their eyes are the same color, and his hair is red like mine...

Interrupting her thoughts, Elric slammed a fist onto the table in anger.

“You don’t know what kind of chaos you brought to the village! Without a white Guardian to support the other four, the entire defense of the village would fall apart! Do you even care that mother had to take your place in the village defense, even though she is getting old and sickly!?”

Illis’ hardened expression fell, revealing shock and surprise to the Fire Bandit. Elric smiled wickedly, knowing he finally exposed a weakness in her stubborn defense.

“The village doctors told me she has a year at most, and that’s if she doesn’t push her luck. It’s been three months since I left. Do you want to see if she’ll make the other nine?”

“Shut up!” She swore, avoiding his stare.

Elric chuckled. “Come now, sister, and return with me for her sake.”

“Sister!?” Ruthy shouted.

Elric glanced over at the redhead. “Illis never told you about me? How rude of her.”

Ruthy looked at Illis, eyes begging for an answer. Illis couldn't meet her sister's glare, and she swallowed her guilt and spoke. Ruthy looked back at Elric, and the similarities between the three manifested themselves so the truth became evident to her, despite her feverant wishing for it to be wrong.

“Yes... he is Elric Killjoy, our brother...”

Ruthy held back a cry of shock. “No... it can’t... it can’t be true!!”

“But it is very true, little sister.” Elric cooed, looking at her. “And you’ve grown to be a pretty young lady from a noisy little four year old.”

“That’s enough out of you, Elric.” Illis threatened.

“Spare me the drama, sister, there’s enough as there is.” He muttered. “You were always the dramatic one, constantly looking to be the center of attention. But as soon as you hit twelve you decided to take leave, exit stage left, bid farewell to the audience. You decided to play the role of the independent woman, a lady who had nothing holding her back and let the fates direct her. Mother

said you'd be changing from a girl to a woman, but I never thought it would change you this much!"

"I changed from a ignorant child to one that sees reality!"

"Your damn rebellious emotions overrode your common sense and convinced you that life in the world is better than at home with your family!"

"How can you call living in a isolated village, forbidden to leave the forest, a life!?"

Elric remained silent, prodding Illis on. "You knew that we would never be able to leave that place until we died. Everything we would live for would be for the 'benefit' of the village, not us!

"But what of Vicktor?" He prodded.

"His attraction to me was entirely based on the arranged marriages you planned for me and Ruthy, all arranged by the elders! Don't think I didn't see that as soon as he first came to our home."

"Well..." He muttered.

"Oh no, I'm not done! You think that you can guilt me into going back home, but you're wrong! I came this far on my own, even with my little sister to add to the work, and I won't go back home and

leave this behind. I worked myself near to death for this, and to go back there would make it all worthless!”

“Well, what of little Ruthy here?” Elric asked.

Illis stood up, knocking her chair over and glaring at Elric with a stare that would have intimidated the gods. “Don’t you dare. Ruthy came with me on her own because she wanted to be with her big sister. I won’t have you trying to convert her to your side!”

“But what if she wants to go home to see her mother?”

“I worked so hard to give her the freedom to live outside the village... and I won’t let her leave and go back to that prison! I won’t let you ruin everything I’ve done for her to make sure she could live as free as her fondest dreams!”

Elric slammed his fists on the table, his face wrinkled in anger, eyes glaring back at the woman. Illis hesitated in her defense, hoping Elric wouldn’t be pushed to attack them in her home.

“You would place your life before the lives of everyone back home?” He posed, venom in his words. “You would abandon them to be harassed by

the monsters of the forest freely? Do you have any idea how many people have died when you could have saved them!?”

Elric walked around the table, anger pushing him to lash more sense into his sister until a blade found itself pressed against his neck. He glanced to his side, seeing the Ruthy next to him, shaking badly as she fought within herself for answers.

“Don’t move!” Ruthy ordered, voice cracking with fear.

“Ruthy, you don’t need to do this.” Elric pleaded.

“She knows the truth about everything, brother, and has chosen my side.” Illis commented, stepping to a rack to draw her sword from its resting place. “And I’ll let choose between leaving this house alive or dead.”

Elric stepped back, hands away from his own sword as he moved towards the door. Illis kept her sword ready, and Ruthy was pointing her dagger at him as if it was the only thing keeping him there. He brought an arm back and found the handle of the front door, opening it and carefully stepping through the doorjamb.

“I warn you, sisters, I won’t let you stay here. I *will* bring you back to the village, even if I have to destroy everything you hold dear in the process!!”

Elric finally turned and left, slamming the door with an echoing finality and leaving the two sisters alone to decide their future.

Chapter Twelve

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Enjoy...

:Faraway Dreams:

Chapter Twelve

“Oh God, oh God...” Ruthy repeated, gasping for breath. “This can’t be real, it can’t be.”

“I’m sorry I never told you, Ruthy, but I didn’t want you to know about him if I could avoid it.”

“But... why?” She whimpered.

“He’s just a pain in the ass, simple as that. He was always looking out for the benefit of the village elders because he thought he was part of it’s divine

heritage. He wouldn't have ever let us leave Ulura without a fight, and even now he's still trying to get us back home. From what he told us, I don't think he will let us stay here as long as he can help it."

Ruthy didn't respond to Illis' words, remaining against a wall with her arms wrapped around herself. The elder woman stepped around the table to her sister and embraced her, a lone tear sliding down her cheek. Ruthy broke down immediately, burying her face into Illis' shoulder and letting her sorrow out.

"It's gonna be okay, sis." Illis cooed, stroking her sister's hair. "Everything's gonna be okay."

"I've... we've been fighting our brother... all this time..."

"I'm sorry." Illis pleaded. "I never wanted it to come to this, believe me."

"What will we do now?"

"We'll have to tell the others, they need to know what they're up against."

"Tomorrow?" Ruthy asked, looking at her sister with teary eyes.

Illis nodded. "Sure. Whatever you want."

The following morning, Gerick and the other Regulators all stood around the Hall waiting for their resident sisters to arrive. The hours had passed by slowly, all of them wondering what was delaying the two from coming. Gordan was worried greatly, hoping that the Fire Bandit hadn't attacked them in his absence.

"Come on, she is almost two hours late than normal!" Gordan growled. "Something must have happened!"

"Give it a rest, Gordan, she's fine." Gerick insisted.

"How can you be so certain that she is? Just how many opportunities were there between the time we left her and now for that Bandit to get them!?"

"Gordan, please," Fedrich pleaded. "I'm sure that Illis and Ruthy are okay! There's no way that Elric could find their home in the middle of all the others, you know that!"

Gordan growled, clenching his fists. "I swore that I would never let—"

— "Let anyone harm me, that you'd defend me from any threat, and so on." A voice recited sarcastically.

Everyone looked towards the double doors of the Hall, seeing both Illis and Ruthy standing in the doorjamb. Gordan was immediately relieved, rushing towards Illis to grip her shoulders in a gentle embrace.

“Thank the heavens that you are uninjured!” He thanked.

Illis gave him a strange look along with the others present, and the nobleman blushed and stepped away, trying hopelessly to compose himself. Illis stepped by the onlookers, picked up a mug, and filled it with bitter coffee, taking a long drink before falling into a chair. Ruthy too walked to a chair and sat down, resting her head on her arms with a tired sigh.

“Is something wrong?” Gordan asked.

The sisters both flinched at the nobleman’s question, but Illis was the only one to look up with an answer.

“Yes. There’s a lot wrong.”

“What do you mean?”

Illis sighed, taking another swig. “Where to start... what to say. I don’t know how to break it to

you...”

“Why not just tell them that Elric is our brother? It would be that simple.” Ruthy muffled.

“What did you say!?” Fedrich blurted, first to hear the quiet words.

“I said that Elric is my brother, what’s so tough about understanding that?” The redhead repeated with a frown.

The others all stood in mute surprise, Fedrich most shocked of all. Ruthy let her face sink into the crook of her arms, tears wetting her flesh as the pain of the revelation returned. The others looked to Illis who still sat with her coffee, trying her best to control her emotions. Gordan stepped forward, putting a hesitant hand across Illis’ shoulder before speaking.

“We... I... I cannot express my sympathies, Illis... I am so sorry that we so eagerly hunted down your own flesh and blood.”

“Don’t you dare apologize for that!” Illis snapped. “As far as I’m concerned, I have no brother! No brother of mine would attack my friends and threaten me as he did.”

“But you cannot simply—”

“Do not make me repeat myself! Elric is no brother of mine!”

Gordan restrained himself from saying anything else, the expression on Illis’ face scaring him more than anything else he experienced. He knew Illis bore a nasty and stubborn attitude, but he didn’t think it was possible for her to be so uncaring of the welfare of her own sibling.

“Well fer Gods sake, why didn’t you tell us before!?” Gerick asked.

“Because I never wanted to accept that he was here, that he was again trying to ruin my plans for life!”

“But you could have tried to understand his motives and save us trouble before that defeat!” Gordan countered.

“It’s been over ten years since I’ve seen him, how could have I possibly been able to understand him when he’s changed so much?”

“Well, If he’s your brother, then you’d know him better than anyone. Why doncha tell us what you

know, Illis, everythin' that would help.” Gerick insisted with a stern look.

Illis sighed. “I suppose I might as well give you all the generic life story, then.

“My hometown is a village named Ulura, located to the southeast of South Gate where its been in isolation for a long time. The people are close knit, and they all have a special trait that is considered rare to the rest of the world, the fact that we all instinctively know magic. Commonly people train to for a few years to master a certain element like Fire or Water, Earth or Wind, and a few rare people are able to learn White magic, my family line included. When I was twelve, I learned that the leaders of the Village were planning to marry me to a strong man to keep the line that knows White magic going, but it meant that I would never be able to leave and live how I wanted to. Once I knew that, I was determined to get away by any means possible, and I knew that I wasn’t going to leave alone.”

“*You mean it!?*” A small child asked. “*We’re gonna go outside the forest?*”

“*Of course we are, little sis. I’m going to take you with me and we’ll travel the world! We’ll see all sorts of things that we’d never see here!*”

*“Wow!” The small child chirped, smiling widely.
“Is mama and papa gonna go with us?”*

The other girl’s expression fell slightly, but she put up a strong front. “No, we’re going alone, just the two of us.”

The child frowned. “But how’re we gonna go? Papa and the others said it’s scary outside, and we hafta stay in the village.”

“Dear sister, you don’t have to be scared, I’ll be with you the whole time.”

“But won’t you be scared?”

The elder girl paused a moment, but nodded weakly. “We all get scared sometimes, but think of the fun we’ll have once we go! Out in the plains, across rivers and mountains, we could even go to the ocean!”

Again the small child squealed with glee. “Yay! When are we gonna go!?”

“Tomorrow, but be sure to keep it a secret, okay?”

“Awright!”

“Promise?”

“I promise!”

“I’d been planning to escape from home for several weeks, getting durable clothes, food and water skins within my reach, medicines, and studying the few maps we had of the area to see where the closest village was. The next day my parents were at a meeting at the village hall, so I finally gathered all the things I needed and prepared to leave, but luck had to screw up my plans by allowing Elric to find me beforehand.

“Illis! What are you doing?” A stern male voice demanded.

Illis looked back and saw her younger brother a few steps away, red hair disheveled and his expression upset.

“I’m going outside the forest.”

The redhead was stunned. “You’ve got to be kidding! The Elders forbid anyone from leaving! It’s too dangerous!”

“I don’t care. I want to see the world, not live here for my whole life.”

“But what about mum and dad? They’ll never let you go!”

“Which is why I didn’t tell them.”

Again the redhead was floored. “Y-you’re nuts! Mad! Dad’ll kill you if he hears about this!”

Illis stepped towards her brother, gripping his shoulders and giving him a glare full of threats. “You won’t tell them about this, or anyone. If you mutter even one peep, I’ll—”

“I’m ready, big sis!” Illis’ little sister chirped.

The redhead looked behind Illis to see the little girl standing ready, and he immediately grew angered. Illis placed a hand over his mouth to stifle any words he would have yelled and again glared at him.

“Be quiet.” Illis warned.

“Damn it, you aren’t taking little Ruthy with you!” He whispered, voice strained.

“Yes I am! Don’t think I’m unaware of her future here! She’s coming with me so we can both live free!”

“I won’t let you! I’ll stop—”

The redhead was cut off as Illis punched him in his stomach for all her worth. He gasped heavily,

then sunk to his knees in pain, slowly falling into unconsciousness from the shock. Ruthy stepped near her sister, holding her legs as she looked at her older brother with a worried face.

“What did you do?” Ruthy asked, her small voice deathly quiet.

Illis leaned down and gave the small girl a hug. “Don’t worry, I just made him sleep for a while so we can go.”

“Yay!” She squealed. “Let’s go!”

Illis put a hand on the young girl’s head, the two walking past the border of their village and into the darkening folds of the forest’s canopy.

“We were lucky enough to be able to get out of the forest before Elric alerted the others. Using the sun and stars, I managed to find out which direction was west and we began walking, breaking free of the forest to reveal and endless open plains with tall mountains to the north. For the first two days the simple shock and wonder of the new landscape and it’s beauty kept me from worrying, but after crossing a bridge and continuing on the third day of the treck I began to worry.”

“Sis, I’m hungry...” Ruthy whined. “Can we eat?”

Illis looked down at her younger sister, the small girl covered in dirt and her hair in a tangled mess. The young woman began to fret about her decision to leave the village, already three days behind them. She heard that to the west was a massive plateau that a city was on, and they just recently crossed a mildly busy bridge by the Cebeel river delta. She was able to buy some produce and dried meat from a passing merchant, but couldn’t convince them to give her a ride, only further directions to a place called ‘Lindblum’.

“Okay, let’s take a break.” Illis smiled.

“Yay! I want the orange!” She asked.

Illis kept her smile, picking out some dried meat and putting it into Ruthy’s hands. “Not this time, have some of the jerky instead.”

“Aww, but it’s all tough and salty!” The girl whined.

“Now now, it’s good for you and tastes fine. We’ll have an orange later today, okay?”

“Okay!” The girl beamed, chewing at the meat with her small teeth.

After a small break to rest their feet and to relieve themselves by a small scrub tree, the two began walking west once again. Illis thought about what they would do in the city. She knew that she was old enough to work most jobs, but she was primarily concerned about Ruthy. The little girl was overly curious about everything, and Illis wasn’t sure if she could handle a job and watch her at the same time. Getting a watcher for her was out of the question, since the city would be a stranger to her.

“How much farther it is?” Ruthy asked, tugging Illis’ pant leg. “When will we see a village?”

“Well, we passed by a bridge and some people, right?” Illis posed.

“Yeah...”

“So where do people go when they cross a bridge?”

Ruthy thought hard for a few seconds. “Home?”

“Right!” Illis smiled. “And their home will be close to a village, and we can start our adventure there!”

“Yay! We’re gonna have lotsa fun, right?”

“Of course! I’ll make sure you can do anything your little heart wants to do!”

*Ruthy wrapped her arms around Illis’ legs.
“You’re the bestest big sis I have!”*

“And you’re my best little sis ever.” Illis replied with a grin, letting the worries of the day fade away.

“Despite being alone with just each other in the wild plains, we never were afraid of the dangers such a journey posed. I just kept leading the way to Lindblum, and Ruthy followed with the intent to be with her sister and to have a great adventure. We had a lucky break, however, when we finally saw the massive rise of the Lindblum Plateau on the horizon, and at the beginning of the fifth day, we ascended to the top on a large cable car, then walked for the afternoon and arrived at the very base of the city. Nothing prepared me for this, nothing could possibly have, but Ruthy didn’t care and expressed herself like I wished I could.”

“Wow!!” Ruthy squealed, her head looking straight up at the monumental structure before them.

“By the Gods...” Illis gasped, looking up as well.

The two were standing at the base of the Hunter's Gate Staircase, straddling the base of the Lindblum Grand Castle. Illis stood still, almost at the verge of breaking down at the sight of such monumental human achievement.

"Sis! It's so big! It's bigger than even the village!"

"You got that right, Ruthy..." Illis whispered back.

"Are we gonna live in there?" The girl begged.

"Sure!" Illis said. "Whatever you want, I'll try to make it happen!"

The girl squealed happily and ran around, amusing the passerby's as she danced in excitement. Illis stepped to a large map of the city, and she quickly began memorizing locations and Districts. After a minute, Ruthy came bounding back and latched herself to Illis' leg.

"Come on, sis, let's go!" She pleaded.

"So we both went into Lindblum, but I didn't have a single clue about what to do. I knew I needed to get a job to get some Gil for a place to say, so I asked around at every shop, but they sent me away

every time. I was about to give up for the day, but little Ruthy managed to find an old lady and wiggle her childish humor into her heart, and she let us stay at their home and help her at a bakery. For a number of months we stayed with her and worked at the bakery, saving our money and working as hard as we could, looking around the city for different jobs and better opportunities to make it.

“For five long years we stayed with the old lady until she became sick and couldn’t work, so she trusted the bakery’s operation to us. She died a year later, and a different man with lots of money bought the store and hired us with better pay. I used our savings to buy our home in the Theater District, and from then on I worked alone and Ruthy stayed at home to keep the house.

“That was how things were until two years ago when I heard about the Regulators, so I trained with a sword for a year and joined for the better pay, Ruthy joining two months later. After Ruthy joined, we gained a Burman member, and a few weeks later, Elric finally found us and began attacking people to draw us out so he could find us. He threatened us to force us to return, but we defied him, and he promised to get us home, even if he had to destroy all we did to make it happen. Ruthy and I and the

Regulators planned to stop him, and the end results were... what we plan on today..."

The others remained silent in thought, taking in the vast history that they never knew of their moody and stubborn member. Illis looked around them, wondering how they would react to her involvement to the danger that they faced, that her actions brought about the threat the Fire Bandit represented. However, her observation of the Regulators brought her to see that Ruthy was missing.

"Where's Ruthy?" She wondered.

The others looked around, brought out of their thoughtful trance.

"I saw her leave while you were talking. I'll find her." Fedrich offered.

The Burman stood and left the Hall, leaving the others to continue thinking as Illis brooded on her past.

* * *

"Ruthy?" Fedrich announced.

Ruthy didn't respond from her position on the rails near the Square. Her gaze was locked onto the open expanse of the sky within Lindblum's walls,

her mind drifting through her emotions, her intense self loathing for have being fighting her own brother without knowing.

“Ruthy?” Fedrich tried again, lightly putting a hand on her shoulder to get a response.

She still didn’t answer, so he removed his hand and merely stood nearby, leaning on the rail to be with her. For a few minutes they remained in the same position, neither of them speaking, letting the situation settle in their minds. Slowly, Ruthy looked to her side to see Fedrich alongside her. The Burman looked to her and gave a light grin.

“Hey.” He spoke. “You okay?”

She sniffed, feeling the onset of tears getting to her eyes as she let the situation overwhelm her. “I’m sorry. I just... I can’t believe that we’ve been fighting my own brother.”

“You shouldn’t feel upset, you didn’t know until now.”

“But still...! I wished so many evil things to happen to him, cursed his name, prayed for his death... and now I know that I said those evil things to my own brother...”

Ruthy leaned forward and fell into Fedrich's chest, her emotions coming to surface and her tears escaping from her eyes to end up soaking into his fur. Sobs broke through her lips, and her arms circled across his back as she clung to his narrow frame. Fedrich was surprised at her falling apart, but he knew that the situation would have driven most anyone to tears. With a slow motion, he brought his arms around and held her to him, hands resting against her shoulders as her body quaked with each sob.

"It's okay, Ruthy." He cooed, trying to calm her.

Her sobbing lessened, but he still held her close so she wouldn't feel alone. Although determined to keep his friends safe, he then knew that he would be the one to make sure that she would be safe.

* ^ * ^ *

The Author Speaks!

Hey, everyone, never thought that I'd put something like this into the chapter, eh? Well, it's the first time I've inserted authors notes directly into a story if it wasn't the end. Rest assured, though, this isn't the end, not by a long shot. I decided to do this to bring you information, whether it be answers to

some questions or the status of the story, you'll find it here.

First, to **Robshi**, I'll point you towards my website for information about Ulura and it's location. Next, for **Lady-Artist1**, I thank you for actually critiquing my writing, your tip makes a lot of sense! Lastly, I merely want to remind you that I have a growing archive of information in regards to the story at my website, freshly updated, where you can read up on information about the story, get some facts on the characters and learn where things are in the story. Just copy this to your browser and have fun!

Love and Peace, people.

Chapter Thirteen

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Enjoy...

:Faraway Dreams:

Chapter Thirteen:

“So then he knows where you live?” Gordan asked.

“Yep.”

Gordan frowned. “Then it is settled. Until we defeat and lock Elric away, I will stay with you at all times to protect you from harm.”

“You don’t need to.”

“I have to. It is required of me to protect those who are in danger.”

Illis sighed. “Since you’ve put it so simply, and I doubt you’ll listen to me anyway, I guess that I’ll let you have your way.”

Gordan smiled. “I thank you for finally accepting the logic behind my words. You would have avoided trouble had I been present when Elric visited your home.”

“I think you’d have caused more trouble if you were there.” She smirked.

Gordan gave her a look. “I am glad to see you have such faith in my diplomatic skill.”

“Alright you two, we need ‘ta come up with another plan, *again*.” Gerick reprimanded. “Now that we know just what we’re dealin’ with, it’ll be easier to get this guy outta our hair.”

“True, so what will we do?” Gordan asked of Illis.

“It’s simple, really. So far we don’t know where he lives or where he usually resides in the city, if he does at all. We know that he knows where my sister and I live, and that he’ll arrive there whenever it

pleases him. Lastly, he won't restrain himself from just threatening my life, but also everyone else's, so he could very well find your places of residence and try to attack you there."

"Then he holds all the cards." Gordan commented.

"All but the trump card, pure statistics that give us a five to one advantage over him. So long as we can prevent him from attacking any of us alone, we can use strength in numbers to overwhelm him like we tried to before in the Business District."

"But how can we do that?" Gerick asked.

"He won't fall for the same trick as before, so we can't lure him to steal something and trap him. The only thing I can think of is to use myself as bait."

Gordan looked at Illis, surprised. "How could you suggest such a dangerous maneuver!?"

"What other choice do we have? If we can't get him to attack us as a group, then he's gonna pick us off one at a time until none of us are left standing."

"But still... there must be another path to take."

"Don't think I want to do this," Illis added. "I'd rather do anything than use myself as a target, but

it's the only viable plan that I can think of. Do any of you have ideas to share?"

Both Gerick and Gordan shook their heads, and Illis gave them a grim smile in reply.

"You see, this is the only plan we have."

"But are you willing to go through with such a dangerous idea?" Gordan further pried.

"I don't have any other choice. This is the only thing I can do." Illis sighed, standing from her chair and setting down the mug she held. "I'm going home to rest, I barely got any sleep... you coming?"

"Of course." Gordan answered, standing to meet her.

"Well then, I suppose I'll see you sometime later, Gerick." She apologized.

"Ah, don't worry yerself, you just get some sleep and take it easy. And Gordan," The bearded man added, drawing the nobleman's eyes. "Please... don't go gettin' yourself worked up over this. Elric's just toyin' with us, and the last thing I'll be needin' is my friend gettin' himself killed over it."

Gordan nodded his concurrence. "I will keep your words present in my mind, old friend."

With those words spoken, the two Regulators exited their Hall and headed further into the Theater District towards the safety of Illis' home. Gerick sighed deeply and leaned back against his chair, staring at the ceiling as he took a rare moment to reflect on his life. He knew how to defeat monsters, how to set traps to capture Vice's in the act of stealing, even how Imps and Goblins communicated with one another, but he didn't have any idea on how to fight a human opponent like Elric. Even with his time as a Sergeant in the Lindblum military, he never had to fight a human with the kind of radical power the Fire Bandit possessed.

Gerick felt unnaturally depressed over the entire situation.

Poor Illis... this is been a stressin' time for her. She's been doin' alright keeping herself together, but how long will she be able to keep that strong front of her's up?...

The elderly man harrumphed, standing to his feet and walking towards the doors of the Hall. Shutting them carefully, he continued his walk down the path towards the Aircabs.

"Might as well let Cecil know what's new." He muttered under his breath.

Gordan and Illis stepped outside of the Hall, both of them silent as they proceeded to her home. However, Gordan's eyes wandered over to a spot of rail at the edge of the Square, and he saw something that gave him a start.

“Illis.” He started, putting a hand to Illis’ shoulder to stop her walk.

“Hmm?” She muttered.

“Take a look over there.” He pointed with a strange expression.

Illis looked towards where Gordan’s finger aimed, and she saw something that surprised her as well, despite having knowledge of what lead to it. Her sister was standing alongside Fedrich, her arms wrapped around his body and his arms crossed over her shoulders, her small body quaking with obvious tears.

Goodness... I didn’t think she’d take what I said so seriously...

“A strange thing, is it not? To see your sister being comforted by someone who she has known for barely a month.” He commented.

“I suppose it is.” She replied in kind.

“Should we say anything?”

Before Illis could reply, she saw the Burman’s head look up from its place and look at her with a surprised expression. Fedrich’s eyes seemed to express his sadness he shared, but also sent a message that he didn’t want them to interrupt, something Illis could understand.

She shook her head. “No, let’s leave them be. I think that things’ll be just fine for them.”

The two shared a brief smile, then continued on their way back to her home.

“Ruthy?” Fedrich asked.

The redhead looked up from her resting place against his chest, her eyes tear-stained and red. The Burman wiped at her cheek with a finger, cleaning away the trail of wetness.

“You gonna be okay now?” He asked.

Ruthy swallowed, but gave a nod and stepped back slightly. “I’m sorry...”

“You don’t need to be, everyone needs to cry out their sorrows now and then.”

The two stepped away from one another, Ruthy wiping her eyes with her arm and holding herself. Fedrich tilted his head as he looked at her, wondering just what kind of emotional damage she suffered from. Before he could speak, she stepped back again, looking around the Square nervously.

“Fedrich... I’m going home.” She excused, turning to jog out of the area and follow the same path Gordan and Illis took just a minute ago.

Fedrich didn’t try to stop her, but merely watched as she rounded the corner of the nearby houses and disappeared into the streets of the district. Once she was gone, he heaved a sigh and let his shoulders slump, the emotional high disappearing and leaving him empty.

“Oh Ruthy... what kind of emotional demons have gotten hold of you?...”

The Burman straightened his stance, looking back out into the open sky of Lindblum’s airspace, following Airships as they progressed from place to place. He reached behind his shoulders to grip the familiar hilt of his weapon and drew it out, the metal glinting in the sunlight.

“Elric... why did he have to come here and do this to us? What kind of person would go and cause this kind of hurt to his own siblings?”

The Burman looked at the sword, studying the razor sharp edge and the design of the swordguard.

Had I been stronger... if I could have stopped him before he went to their house... I could have done something to stop him from making Ruthy suffer like that...

Fedrich stared at his reflection in the metal edge of his short sword, his dull green eyes staring into himself as if trying to peer into his soul. He kept reflecting back to his confrontation with Elric, seeing the bandit's skills were far above his own. Despite his assurances that the difference in their skill was purely on experience, Fedrich couldn't shake the ill notion that he was somehow being held back from attaining his own limits.

*Why is it that Elric is so much stronger than me?
Why can't I improve fast enough to meet him?
Gordan told me that I'm improving in battle, but
why don't I feel any more confidant in myself?*

The Burman shook his head, looking away from the sword.

I shouldn't reflect so much on this... but what will happen if I face Elric again and I'm still unable to compete with him? I don't have the luxury to take as much time as I need to improve, my training has to bring better results than this...

Fedrich lifted his sword up and assumed his offensive stance, then jumped forward and lashed out with the weapon repeatedly, forcing his illusionary opponent back. He then leapt into the air and performed a downward stroke, imagining his opponent's struggle to defend himself against the strike. From his crouching position, he then jumped up with a twirl of his blade, knocking his opponent off balance, then landed and thrust the blade forward to impale the illusionary foe, ending the sequence of strikes. The Burman sighed, again glancing out towards the horizon of Lindblum's walls while wondering just what he needed to make himself stronger.

“What can I do? I've trained just as father told me to, but what else can I do to improve myself?”

The air didn't give him any answers, and Fedrich grumbled, looking back at the blade to see his reflection in it's surface. His eyes only reflected the same inner turmoil he felt, something he wished he

didn't have. With a growl of frustration, he returned to his offensive stance and began the motions again, fighting the illusionary warrior with increased ferocity.

I'll have to make due with what I have, I must improve my skill, and I'll be damned if I fail my friends again!

Completing the sequence of moves, he thrust the short sword out with a battle cry, narrowing his eyes.

Ruthy... I'll never let Elric take you away from this place...

* * *

"You can be serious!? Elric is brother to Illis and Ruthy!?" Cecil repeated, face wide with shock.

Gerick nodded. "Yep, caught all of us by surprise when she told us."

The blonde Captain shuffled on his feet, face reflecting the confusion running through his head. "Gods... that just makes things freakin' great! How are we gonna get rid of the bastard when those two are going to pitch a fit about harming him?"

"You don't need 'ta worry about that. Illis seems set on gettin' rid of the guy, it's Ruthy that's got

issues with fightin' her newfound brother."

"What are we gonna do about her, then?"

Gerick's bearded face frowned. "She's just gonna have to accept that he's a criminal and a danger that needs 'ta be removed and locked away. She isn't gonna try and stop us, if that's what your worried about."

"Nah, she doesn't seem like the type to do that." Cecil said, shaking his head. "But how does this help us any?"

"Elric found Illis at her home, and he basically told her that he was gonna drag her back to her hometown. She thinks he's gonna visit her again to 'talk' her into comin' home, so she wants 'ta use herself as bait to let us get the drop on him."

Cecil grumbled. "We tried something like that already, but he got away, remember?"

"Yeah, but she's gone 'ta think that we'll have no other time to try, since we can't find him in the city."

"Then it's the same trick, same risks, same damned challenge as before."

"Cept this time he'll be in familiar ground for us. We can trap him in Illis' house and get him there."

“And if we warps?”

“You remember how close Fedrich got ’ta tagging him in the Jewelry Sector? This time we’ll be in arms length of the guy, it’s gotta work this time.”

“Yeah, we have to get him this time. The Lady Chief is taking so much heat from the Royal Circle of Counselors that she’ll come down here with lance in hand to get the bastard herself.”

“Then let’s make this happen.”

“Right! I’ll station some additional guards on the streets to her home so we’ll know if he’s nearby. I’ll also have some of my fastest messenger birds with them so they can send word to you if they see him. Hopefully we can trap this damned Bandit before he can do anything else to complicate matters.”

Chapter Fourteen

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Enjoy...

:Faraway Dreams:

Chapter Fourteen:

“It’s been nearly a week since he came here.” Illis commented over a mug of coffee.

“True.” Gordan replied, lightly reading a periodical.

“Don’t you think it’s odd he hasn’t tried anything since then?”

“Perhaps he is finally understanding of your desire to stay with us.”

“I doubt it, he said a lot of things that proved otherwise.”

“But his actions seem to reflect hesitation, at the least, or maybe he is threatened by the unified front we present. Not only has he not done anything to do, but he has yet to commit a robbery since that day.”

Illis moaned in frustration. “Gods, this is what drives me to be so worried. He said he’d take me home or make everyone I know suffer in place of that, but he hasn’t done a damn thing to me or anyone else. What can he be planning...”

“He obviously wants to take you back to your hometown, but he never seems to attack you or Ruthy singularly.”

“Yeah, your point?”

“When I sit and think about the various methods he could employ to capture you, there are many options that I can see that he has not considered. For instance, what would prevent him from using a warp spell to enter your home at night, use some sleeping weed to render you unconscious, then take you away?”

“Good grief, don’t say things like that, I don’t need to be any more paranoid than I am already!”

Illis complained.

“But these are the things you *need* to consider. With his array of spells and seemingly limitless treachery, he is a foe to be greatly concerned about. What would have stopped him from attacking you or taking you away when he first confronted you here?”

Illis looked away from Gordan’s stern face. “I don’t know...”

“Then it is obvious that whatever his intentions are, he will go about them at his own leisure. It still leaves one to wonder what his goals are if he is not taking every opportunity to his advantage.”

“What, you think there’s something else to him?”

“Well, I already posed a few situations that would give you to him with the least amount of effort, but he has not done them. Either he has not thought of those alternatives, or perhaps he is taking this plan to an end I have not seen.”

“But what else could he be here for? He seems to be solely focused on getting me to return to my home.”

“Maybe *that* is the source of his delay.” Gordan mused.

“What do you mean?”

“Perhaps his hesitant actions as of late are because he too has qualms about returning you to Ulura.”

“But why would he be?” She wondered.

“That is best left to be answered by Elric himself...”

* * *

Fedrich contemplated the darkness with a sour expression, not even bothering to look at the projection of the sequence of supposed future events.

“Alright, Phantom, what do you want this time?” He asked to the inky expanse, annoyed.

You seem agitated

“I’ve got reason enough to be, what with you showing me these visions about the end of the world.”

Whether or not you believe me is relative, what matters the most is that you hear the message

“Oh, and what else have you to say to me? You didn’t even answer my question last time!”

The events in the future have numerous threads that help support the web itself, and although the web is beyond your ability to completely undo, you have the choice to assist in affecting its design

“How so? You’ve got to tell me what my connection is if you want me to do it!”

The voice didn’t respond to his demand, and Fedrich feared that the mysterious speaker would again leave him hanging. He hadn’t experienced this dream in a long time, and he didn’t want to be forced to wait an even longer time before he tried to get another answer.

“Phantom?”

Silence.

“Damn it, this is why you are a pain to deal with! If you can see into the future and see such things, surely you must understand that I’m in trouble as it is!”

You realize that if I give any kind of response that defines a fact of this certain future, it will cause my ability to communicate with you to be lost

“Lost?” Fedrich repeated. “Why?”

The forces behind my existence within your realm have a strict set of regulations that forbid a seer from giving any clear facts about the future, and as such, would immediately remove me from this position for tampering with the inhabitant of this timeline

“And this would be a bad thing?”

There is much more to be explained if it were merely given in obscure and metaphorical phrases, where the events would be up to you to comprehend and act on based on your will, not my own

“Well, I’m quite frankly sick of these dreams. I’ve got enough troubles in life without you coming here and giving me more worries about my future.”

Then what do you want to be clarified?

“You said that last time I was connected to an important string in this ‘web of destiny’ you talk about. Just what exactly is the string? Is it a person, some place or event?”

It is... the soul of—

Fedrich's eyes shot open, his sleeping self awake instantly from his mysterious dream. He sat up from his bed to see the late morning light shining through his solitary window, and he wondered what happened at the end of the prophetic dream.

"The soul of... what?" Fedrich spoke, feeling each syllable across his tongue as if he expected it to do something.

What kind of connection to I have to this mysterious soul? A better question is what the soul is supposed to refer to. Maybe I know the soul of the person who is supposed to be the one who brings about the end of the world?

The Burman shook off the sluggishness of his mind and stood up, rubbing his face free of sleep. He glanced outside the window, thoughts of the dream fading away and the harshness of reality came to surface. The Fire Bandit resurfaced in his mind, along with Fedrich's desire to get stronger and to stop him at any cost.

"I don't have time for this. I have to stop Elric before I can worry about those dreams..."

He walked over to his dresser and donned his clothing, picking up his sword and leaving his room

for his morning appointment with Gordan for practice. Taking a momentary look at his small pocket watch, he was surprised to see it was already nine.

Damn... I've got zero minutes before I'm supposed to be there...

Fedrich closed the door to his room and jogged into the main room of the Hall, seeing Gerick at rest with his ever present mug of coffee at hand.

“Morning, Gerick!” He said quickly.

“G’mornin’ yourself.” The bearded man replied.

“I’m off to practice with Gordan, so I’ll see you later!”

“Don’t forget that Macky’s gonna be comin’ here this afternoon, so be sure ’ta get here at noon!”

“Of course!” Fedrich agreed, passing through the doors into the warming morning air.

The Burman kept up his pace as he traversed the streets and stairs of the Theater District, hoping that Gordan wouldn’t be overly upset at his tardiness. The late morning sun was already sending waves of heat across his back, and Fedrich knew this was going to be a warm afternoon. The end of spring was

coming close, and soon the intense heat of the summer season would be upon him.

And only after the beginning of Fall will the Festival of the Hunt begin. If I can improve myself and get strong enough to beat the Fire Bandit, then winning the Festival will be much easier...

Crossing through a small intersection of streets, Fedrich leapt into one of the alleys and followed it to the end, looking at the door to the last home on the street overlooking the open skies of Lindblum's airspace. The Burman collected himself, then stepped forward and knocked on the door. After a few seconds, the sound of locks being drawn in came from the opposite side, and the door opened to reveal the well dressed frame of Gordan.

"Sorry I'm late." Fedrich immediately apologized.

"It is okay, Fedrich, do come in." He welcomed, stepping back.

The Burman stepped inside, accustomed to the sparse and neutral surroundings that Illis' home consisted of.

"Good morning." Fedrich offered to Illis herself, who was resting on a chair with some coffee.

“Morning, Fedrich,” She replied.

“Where’s Ruthy?”

“Still sleeping.”

“Ah.” He nodded. “She’s still...?”

Illis frowned. “Yeah, she can’t get to sleep at night until exhaustion forces it to her.”

“Poor girl...” He sighed.

“There’s no use in worrying yourself about it. I’m sure she’ll snap out of it sooner or later.”

“I think she’ll only rest well once Elric is out of the picture.” Fedrich snapped.

“Well then, perhaps we should get to your practice to make sure the next attempt it successful, eh?” Gordan suggested.

“Right.”

The two stepped outside of the small home, giving farewells to Illis as they proceeded down the pathway to a round outcropping in the street, offering a semi-circular area to overlook the city with a few benches. Gordan stretched his arms and

legs while Fedrich drew his sword, performing a few experimental swings to get his blood flowing.

“So how are things with you?” Gordan asked.

“Alright, I suppose, although I’m still worried about Ruthy and Illis.” He replied. “And yourself?”

“I am making the best of things. Illis seems glad to have me around despite her previous grievances with me staying.”

“That’s good to know.” Fedrich concurred.

“Alright, enough banter, you’ve got practice to do.” Gordan insisted, drawing his own sword. “Let’s start with the basics. Come at me!”

Fedrich did as he was instructed, moving forward at a slow pace with his sword ready. He swung it slowly, keeping track of his limbs and their motions while checking the angle of the swords fall as well. Gordan blocked the strike with his weapon, then used a strong push to separate the blades. Gordan then brought the sword back to hit the Burman’s middle, but the shorter sword already blocked the strike. The two brought their blades away, and Fedrich was first to send his sword out in an arc leading towards Gordan’s shoulder. The Nobleman was quick to react, using his own sword to divert the

energy of the movement away from his body and into the open space away from his body. He then slid his sword out and pushed the edge to Fedrich's neck, signaling the end of the short duel.

"Enough." Gordan ordered, pulling his sword away.

"You used the same move I use, again!" Fedrich commented, a little bit upset.

"Well, it is not like there is a law forbidding the use of a proper combat technique, is there?"

"I suppose not. Where did I go wrong?"

"You made an error rather common to lesser experienced warriors, no insult to you. Let's recreate the scene where you started your attack towards my shoulder."

The two moved into the proper positions, Fedrich paying extra attention to his body's location in comparison to Gordan's.

"Now start moving your sword down slowly, and I will do the same."

The two began the attack, moving slowly until Gordan interrupted.

“Now you see here,” He motioned with his head. “That my arms are somewhat extended from my body, insuring that your blade will have to travel farther before it can reach my flesh. This is a simple rule that dictates the proper form of a swordsman with a longer blade. My blade has a longer reach, so I can keep you from hitting me easier than you would I.”

“Uh huh.” Fedrich nodded.

“Also take notice of *your* arms. You are putting a lot of your body into the attack, adding power to the strike that your arms and weapon alone are not able to generate. This makes your attack riskier, in that if you fail to deliver a strong blow, your opponent will have an easier time counterattacking. Let us continue moving.”

The two resumed the attack, Fedrich short sword hitting Gordan’s, and the Nobleman again used his blade to transfer the energy away so the Burman’s blade slid away from Gordan’s body.

“Stop, now this is where your attack comes into danger.” He again motioned. “Your attack at this point has failed, but your primary error was not making an attempt to pull back your body’s movement. Since my arms are farther away from my

body, I can draw them back and allow your momentum to carry your sword off mine. From there, a combination of your body's motion and the thrust of my arms can send the edge of my sword into your neck, offering a bloody if not lethal cut to the veins.”

“So how would have I stopped you from doing that?” Fedrich asked.

Gordan thought for a moment. “There are not many means to slowing your body down quickly once it is in motion, so your options would have been limited. The only chance I see would have been to redirect your energy to the opposite direction of your swing, causing you to fall down and hopefully avoid the brunt of my counterattack. This would leave you on the ground, but it would open up a chance to back away and continue the battle.”

“That makes sense. I was hoping that you would’ve just parried the strike and pushed me away like before.”

“There is a lesson to be learned, that you should never assume your enemy will fall to a specific pattern.” Gordan chided with a grin. “Always assume that your opponent will use every opportunity to counter your moves, so that you

cannot be easily lead into a dangerous situation like this one.”

“I’ll remember that.”

“Also you should not be willing to be as offensive with a shorter sword unless you have an open shot. Had you remembered this, the battle could have gone on with you performing the same counterattack on me.”

“I’ll keep that in mind, too.”

“Good, then let us continue.” Gordan ordered, stepping away from the Burman. “However, today I wish to further hone your defensive and counteractive capabilities, as it is the natural strength of your sword’s design. I will come at you and perform a series of strikes, and you will defend against them and counterattack whenever you think you can do so.”

“Right.” Fedrich agreed, readying his weapon for use.

“Then let us begin!”

The two warriors again battled with one another, blades clashing with one another in a slow and

methodical fashion as they continued to spar, both working towards similar goals.

* ^ * ^ *

The Author Speaks!

G’afternoon everyone, it’s me, once again, here to gift you with various tidbits of information and other stuff of mild or otherwise useless value and to answer questions posed by those who graced me with their reviews. So firstly, to **Robshi**, I’ll be rather blunt. The chapters are numbered, and I don’t think it’s all that tough to remember a simple number.

Lastly, if you’ve been around any source of news in the past few days, you’ve probably heard about the obscenely dangerous fires rampaging through the Southern California area. Well, as luck would have it, those very fires came close to my home, and we’re still under voluntary evacuation orders. My writing’s have been delayed quite a bit, so don’t be surprised if the next update comes later than what seems like normal.

Have a good day, peoples.

Chapter Fifteen

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Enjoy...

:Faraway Dreams:

Chapter Fifteen:

“Well, I hope that you’ll keep out of trouble and cut the heroics from your life.” Dr. Harris insisted.

“Don’t worry, it’s not like I’m out to get my body burnt on a daily basis.” Macky replied with a smirk.

“You’d think otherwise by the look of you.” Harris shot back. “Now get going, and don’t give me any more reasons to see you in my office again.”

“Yeah yeah, I’ll stay safe, old man. See ya.” Macky waved, walking towards the double doors of the Regulator’s Hall.

The brown haired man took a gentle pace towards his destination, Dr. Harris turning to leave with a pace slowed by age. Macky’s ears picked up the sound of hurried footsteps from behind, and he looked back in time to see a white and blonde blur rush by. He spun back and saw the figure dash into the Hall, loud voices coming from within. Macky jogged towards the Hall’s doors only to be knocked aside by Gerick and the other figure, both armed with weapons.

“Blast it all, can’t you people watch it!?” Macky swore.

“Don’t have the time! The Fire Bandit’s at it again!” Gerick announced to his fallen comrade.

“He’s causing all kinds of crap at Fabool Square!” The other figure, Cecil, added. “We gotta get there before he gets away again!”

“Well... have fun, the doc’s ordered me to take it easy this week.” Macky explained.

“Go get Illis and ’ta others! They’re all at her house!” Gerick ordered.

Macky scrambled to his feet. “Now that’s something they didn’t stop me from doing, I’m on it!”

Gerick and Cecil took off running towards the Aircab terminal while Macky sprinted his way up the stairs and streets of the Theater District. After several minutes of intense running, Macky finally arrived at Illis’ house and crashed against the door, knocking while gasping for breath. The door opened and Gordan was surprised to have the Regulator’s representative fall into his arms.

“Macky?” Gordan started.

“No time!” He gasped. “Fire bandit... he’s attacking Fabool Square! Gerick ’n Cecil are already on the way!”

Gordan’s eyes widened in surprise. “Seriously? Come on, get inside.”

Macky stumbled his way into the house, collapsing into a chair. Illis stood to assist him, but the exhausted man waved her off.

“Don’t worry about me, you gotta go and help Gerick before the Bandit gets him!”

Gordan and Illis shared a knowing expression, and the nobleman faced the tired man. “Alright, you just rest here and we will take care of this!”

“You get Fedrich and go, I’ll get Ruthy up!” Illis shouted.

“Right!”

People screamed in terror as fireballs exploded across the cobblestone, scattering carts and goods into the air. Lindblum Guards ran into the fray to try and stop the attack, but many of them were forced back by the sheer danger of being roasted in their scorched armor. Workers were assembling bucket brigades to help douse any structural fires, ignoring the dangers and working to limit collateral damage. At the center of the maelstrom was Elric, his face expressing a malicious grin and his eyes wide with the drunken pleasure of his work.

Come on... someone’s got to alert them to this! You can’t keep ignoring me!

From outside the fires of the Square, a whistling screech passed by Elric’s ear and alerted him to a threat close by. He ended his fiery attacks against the marketplace, the flames parting to reveal Ruthy standing tall, her longbow ready with an arrow

tensed. Further behind the forms of the other Regulators stood present, weapons drawn and ready.

Elric smiled widely “It’s about time you came here, I almost got bored waiting for you!”

“What the hell do you want this time?” Illis asked, stepping forward to confront the bandit.

“You already know what I want, sister, so why should I bother repeating myself?”

“And you know what I’m going to say, so why should *I* bother to do the same?”

“Oh, just on the off chance that you might come to your senses and see that coming home is the best for everyone.”

Illis growled, her frustration building. “Tell me, why *are* you so damned determined to take me home?”

“I’ve already explained myself to you, sister.” He shot back.

Illis scowled. “Your explanation is weak, there must be another reason why.”

“There is none.”

“Yes there is, *brother*, you can’t fool me.” She smiled. “There’s no way that you could have taken twelve years to find me when it took you less than a week in Lindblum to find my home. You could have taken me away any time you wanted, but you’ve just been taking all the time in the world to do so. No normal person would take this much time when he had the power to do it immediately!”

“Alright then,” Elric spat. “You want to know the real reason why? Huh!?”

“It would make things interesting.”

“The truth is that I wasn’t sent out to look for you until a year ago. Up until then our parents and the elders made me go through intense training to hone and perfect my magical prowess, wanting me to make up for the lack of your presence. They saw how well I played the role as a Guardian of the village, so they granted me the title of *Knight of Fire* so long as I met one condition. Care to give a guess as to what it is?”

“To bring me and Ruthy home.”

Elric chuckled. “Wrong, but good guess. The Elders were upset that you left, and they deliberated over your fate many times because of the importance

it held. Before I left, the Elders came to a decision that was hard for me to believe. They wanted me... to..."

"To what?"

Elric's face grew very dark, his eyes reflecting inner anger. "Their orders were as follows: If Illis or Ruthy Killjoy cannot be willingly convinced to return to Ulura, then they are to be killed to prevent their heritage to be passed on, thus preserving the One Law."

Illis and everyone else's faces became ashen, Ruthy's hold on the arrow faltering. Elric grumbled to himself, crossing him arms and avoiding the shocked glares from the Regulators.

"What's the One Law?" A stunned Ruthy asked.

"The One Law is that no one within the village would leave for fear of releasing the incredibly dangerous powers that we possess, making our village a target for anyone who would want the power we have. It's to make sure that we are never captured and forced to use our powers for the wrong reasons."

"You... can't be serious..." She sputtered. "I though... I though that was just something to scare

us into staying...”

“It is very real, sister, and that’s why I’m willing to do anything possible to make you understand that going home is the best for you and all your friends here. That’s why I’ve given you all the time in the world to try and come to that conclusion yourself!”

“But... you can’t expect me...”

“I know it’s hard, but you must think of the greater cause in it!” Elric explained further, interrupting. “I know that I’ve been harsh, unrelenting in my mission, but I never did it out of pure anger or for revenge. You are my sister, I could never truly hate you.”

“Then why are you doing this to me!” Illis screeched, losing her control.

“I’m doing it because it is my duty to bring you and Ruthy home! Mother and Father both mourn over your absence, even to this day! Everyone wants you to come home, even the Elders, despite their orders.”

“And you value your damned duty more than my happiness!?”

Elric hesitated a moment, but narrowed his eyes in determination. “Everything need to have order. Without order, chaos would reign supreme and life wouldn’t be worth living. I cannot and will not let my emotions override my orders!!”

Illis drew her sword out and held it ready, eyes burning with anger. “Then it looks like someone’s gonna have to die before this will come to an end.”

Elric pulled his own broadsword free of its sheath, glaring back at his sister. “A battle between siblings where the warriors smiled. This will be a day to remember, our innocence defiled!”

Brother and sister charged one another, swords on high. The blades fell and hit, sparks from the metal shooting away as they entered into a deadly contest of skill. Fedrich started forward to help, but a firm hand on his shoulder restrained him. He looked back and saw Gordan by his side, face grim and serious as he watched the siblings fight each other with intense anger raging in their hearts.

“Why?” Fedrich asked quickly.

“This is something between brother and sister, I think it would be better if we stayed out of this.”

“But what if Illis gets hurt?”

“Oh, do not think I have surrendered my blade just yet,” Gordan replied, his grip tightening on the hilt of his sword. “If Illis falls to that damned Bandit, I will not hesitate to take her place.”

Fedrich nodded his approval, then looked back to witness the fight he wished hadn’t started.

Swords rang out loudly as the two warriors battled with their utmost, light flickering off the metal as they grinded against one another. Elric swung his sword out across the air, forcing Illis to duck the strike to save her own head only to feel the thick sole of a boot clip her nose. The dark clothed woman rolled backward, avoiding a downward stroke by Elric, and quickly got to her feet and lashed out herself. Blades again collided together, then recoiled and struck again as the two attempted to force openings into the others defense.

“Damn you and your stubbornness!!” Elric cursed, taking his sword down.

The swords hit one another and stuck in place, both struggling to force the other down. Elric, desperate to gain an advantage, brought a hand free of the sword hilt and tried to bring up a spell, his body quaking with effort to defend and gather strength. Summoning the proper power needed, Elric

grinned and began to chant the spell, pointing his palm toward his sister's body. Illis, realizing the danger, stressed her muscles to their limit as she shoved Elric off balance, the bandit's arms going astray as the spell was cast, its aim sending the fireball into the stone walls of the buildings. Using the limited time she saw left, Illis then brought the sword back up in a strike that flayed open the flesh of Elric's chest, a bloody wound from his side to his shoulder. Elric's face registered the pain, but his mouth betrayed no words as he fell onto his back.

Illis pointed the sword down at the fallen Bandit.
“Game over, brother.”

Elric mouth moved, but his voice was so small that Illis couldn't make out the words. She leaned a little closer to try and hear, but she immediately backpedaled when she felt something tingle across her skin. Elric's arms snapped forward, his expression reverted to the anger he had moments before as he screamed out a very clear word.

“Fira!!”

The spell exploded across Illis' body, the flames roaring and consuming the obstacle it struck, knocking her body into the air and throwing it several meters away from where she once stood. The

Regulators all leapt from their places to her aid while Elric struggled to his feet, uneasy fingers trying to hold a high potion to his lips, blue liquid spilling down his cheeks. He managed to regain his balance in time to see the first glaring accusations from the Regulators around his sister, the man's dark blue eyes filled with anger.

“You heartless demon...” Gordan started. “What could have possessed you to inflict such wounds on your own sister?”

“The same thing that possessed *her* to try and cut me in half!” Elric shouted back, forcing the pain back. “What? Are you upset about it?”

“Words alone cannot describe the ways I imagine your life ending this day.”

“That’s mighty arrogant of you, pretty boy.”

“You are in no condition to ridicule my words when you can barely stand upright.”

“I hear a challenge in that tone of yours.” Elric grimaced, feeling his wound begin to grow numb as the potion helped to heal it.

“You are hardly worth it, wounded as you are.”

Elric chuckled, regretting the action as the pain flared up. “This is a pinprick compared to the pain I’ve felt before. I should kick your ass for insulting me like that!”

Gordan turned to face the Bandit with his sword raised and prepared. “You will not pose a threat as you are, stand down.”

“Oh, enough of this!” Elric insisted, drawing his sword up to meet Gordan’s stance. “Forget the words and come at me if you want to die so much!”

“Then prepare yourself for the life hereafter!” The nobleman shouted, rushing to attack.

Elric held his ground, sword up and ready to block the coming strike. When the two blades connected, Elric felt his arms burn in pain as Gordan’s fierce attack nearly broke his defense. After a second, the two broke stance and began battling, weapons crashing with the same intensity of the fight before. Gordan was surprised that the wounded Elric was able to keep up with the strain of the battle, blood actively staining his leather shirt and dripping onto the cobblestone. Further shocking the nobleman was Elric’s powerful swing at the base of his sword, forcing the weapon out of his gloved

hands and onto the ground. Elric grinned widely as he raised his sword and pointed it at Gordan's face.

"Goodness me, you really need to practice more often."

Gordan didn't respond, his eyes focused on the tip of the sword.

"Speechless? Good! I like it when people die in silence!!"

Elric pulled his arm back, but a shadow fell across his vision and alerted him to approaching danger. Stunning both, Fedrich's nimble form landed between the two, his short sword's momentum forcing Elric's broadsword out of his hand to clatter onto the ground. The shorter blade then snapped up and placed itself between Elric's eyes, barely a hair's breadth separating the two.

"Don't move." Fedrich ordered.

"You again..." Elric muttered.

"Don't even speak!" The Burman pressed. "If you so much as bleed the wrong way I'll split you open!"

"Fedrich..." Gordan started.

“Don’t worry, he’s not going to surprise me this time. Go get Cecil.”

“...Of course.” He agreed, running back to get the Guard Captain.

Elric watched as they moved about their business, then looked back at the Burman holding him hostage. “What are you going to do?”

“Cecil is the Captain for the Second Lindblum Security Division, and he’s been ordered to stop your attacks on the people. All we’re concerned about it capturing you, he’s the one who will determine your future.”

Elric snorted. “What’s he gonna do? Lock me away in the dungeons? No room, no barrier exists that I can’t escape from with a warp spell.”

Fedrich’s fur bristled at the truth in his words.

He smiled. “You should know quite well that no one is capable of holding me captive.”

“Then I’m just gonna have to invent some new methods of containment for ya!” Cecil interrupted, walking forward to meet with the Bandit alongside Gordan.

“Cecil, I presume?”

“That’s Mr. Cecil *Sir*, to you, pyro-boy!” The blonde ordered. “You’ve done a lot to piss me off recently, and you’re lucky that the Security Council’s even gonna grant you a trial! If it were up to me, I’d kill you here and now!”

“You’re going to regret it if you don’t.” Elric grinned.

“I’ll think on that, but for the time being, it’s sleepy-time for you.”

Cecil reached forward and pinched Elric’s nose shut, then forced a vial of liquid down his throat as he gasped for breath. He let go of the Bandit as he coughed violently, slowly falling to the ground until he collapsed unconscious. Fedrich looked down at him, then at Cecil with a confused expression.

“Sleeping weed, it’s not just for insomniacs anymore!” He laughed. “He’ll be out for several hours at the least, enough time to get him to the armory and then the castle.”

“So what will you do with him?”

“Like I’ve said, he’s gonna get a trial, more than likely a sentence of life imprisonment, exile, or preferably death.”

“So then... I guess our mission is finally over with.” Fedrich commented.

“It most definitely is!” Cecil boasted, slapping the Burman’s shoulder. “And I’ll not forget all the help you and the rest gave to me! It’s been fun!”

Gordan approached the man and offered his hand. “It has been a pleasure working with you.”

“It’s been nice working with you as well! I’ve got ’ta be going to the Armory to get this guy locked up.”

Cecil leaned down and hefted the sleeping Bandit across his shoulder, then started out to the Aircab station. “Catch ’ya later!”

“Alright... see ya!” Fedrich uttered, waving the Captain off.

The two Regulators stood idle as they watched Cecil walk away with Elric’s prone body across his shoulder, bystanders staring with wide eyes at the sight. Fedrich glanced back at Illis, seeing Ruthy and the others circling her body and administering potions and herbs to help with the burns on her body.

“Victory... but at such a cost.” Gordan sighed heavily, echoing his own thoughts.

“At least Elric’s been captured. Illis won’t have to worry about him ever again.”

“Still, his threats are very real. Unless the trial ends in execution, there is always the chance that he will come back and reap his vengeance on us all...”

Chapter Sixteen

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Enjoy...

:Faraway Dreams:

Chapter Sixteen:

“Are you feeling any better today?” Gordan asked.

“A little... I’m still sore...” Illis answered, glancing down at her bandaged torso. “I suppose that’s to be expected from Fira...”

“I am sorry that I was not able to save you from harm...” He apologized.

“Come on, you couldn’t have done anything to stop him, so stop beating yourself over it.” She insisted, sitting up on her bed. “Besides, this is hardly anything to worry about.”

“Still, I cannot help but feel guilty...” He moaned.

“Ah, I swear you noble types can’t get over anything without having to kill yourself with guilt. How many times do I have to tell you that I’m not upset and that you did as much as you could?”

“But...!”

“If you try and apologize for this even one more time, I’m gonna get Gerick’s hammer and bash every word I say into your thick skull!” Illis threatened with a joking smirk.

“Alright, alright!” Gordan said, standing down. “I will keep it to myself.”

“Good.” Illis smiled. “Any word on what the trial outcome was?”

“Mackenzie received a notice from the court yesterday, but you were sleeping when he came, so I decided to tell you at a later date.”

“Well, now’s as good a time as ever.”

“Okay. From what Mackenzie was told, the trial was short, but very stressful as Elric was present under the supervision of several guards while also being bound and gagged to prevent him from using spells. Several witnesses were brought to testify in front of the judge, and Cecil and his guards were present to confirm his abilities, since a demonstration was out of the question. After much deliberation, the judge came to the obvious conclusion to Elric’s guilt in cases from thievery, assaulting a guard of the country, and severe public destruction. Although, there was some conflict as to what punishment was suitable to him.”

“What? How could the judge have any second thoughts to his punishment?”

“Yes, this did lead many people to wonder about his judgement, but apparently his questioning was of a malicious purpose instead of an unsure one. After hearing the evidence, he deemed that ‘a quick, clean death is too good for the likes of this devil’, and he offered the court members a different solution. Instead of execution or torture, he offered to use a portion of his own gil to pay for an airship to deposit him into the deepest and most extreme heights of the Aerbs Mountain range, where he could slowly die from exposure to the elements.”

Illis remained silent over the words, her expression mixed between disgust and concern.

“Illis?” Gordan questioned.

“I’m alright. It’s... I didn’t think the court would do something that extreme...”

“You do not approve?”

“Oh no, I think he deserves every bit of it for what he did! I just didn’t think that the judge would think of something that... creative.”

“Creative if you have a sick sense of humor, perhaps.”

“That would fit the bill, then.” Illis grinned. “I’m just glad that the bastard’s finally getting justice, and neither you nor I will have to worry about him any longer.”

“Indeed. We have beaten our enemy and finally earned our respite.”

* * *

Gerick sat down heavily onto a chair, taking a swig of his coffee as he thought on the aftermath of the entire event concerning the Fire Bandit. He glanced over at Macky, the younger man resting

easily in another chair and giving the ceiling a looking over.

“So what’s yer thoughts on it?” Gerick asked.

“Well, it’s unexpected to have someone given a sentence *that* severe, but I think he deserves it and an ass kicking for good measure!” Macky laughed.

“I’ll agree with ya on that one.” The bearded elder chuckled. “How was the trial? Quick, I bet.”

“Yeah, since there wasn’t anyone to try and contest the charges, it was rather one sided.”

“Heh, well things’ll be gettin’ back to normal now. I can finally get out of this damn Hall ‘n go back to huntin’ down monsters!”

“Yeah, the First Division Captain has been doing nothing but complaining that her men are wasting their time patrolling the city walls and roads. Personally I think that she’s just too damn arrogant to admit that we do a better job than her men.”

“Well, we’ll be ready ’ta go and prove that we can do better than any of those pansies!”

“Something I’m more than sure you’re eager to show.” Macky smirked.

“So what’re you gonna do now?”

“The same thing I always do, stay up all night because the damn security council can’t schedule their meetings on time. Did you forget that my life revolves around their constant inefficiency?”

“Ah yeah... that’s true.”

Macky gave a dry laugh. “God’s you need to get out, your brain sounds as fried as my body was.”

“But you haven’t lost that damn tongue of yours from it!”

The two shared a brief laugh at one another, both finally able to relax after the weeks of stress before.

* * *

Fedrich rested on the bench with his hands supporting his chin, eyes neutrally staring out over the airspace of the Lindblum walls. The events of the past day weighed heavily on his conscious, although he thought that the defeat and sentencing of Elric would have lifted the stress from his mind. Everyone else was greatly relieved to hear his fate, yet Fedrich couldn’t move on.

“Hey.” A voice spoke from his side.

Fedrich's head snapped to see the voice, but he relaxed when the familiar form of Ruthy came into his vision. She smirked at his surprise, then took a seat next to him on the bench.

"Hello to you, too." He greeted. "You feeling any better?"

"I'm doing a lot better, really," She nodded. "now that I know Elric isn't able to do anything to us anymore. I got to bed early and slept a lot last night for a change."

"That's good to hear."

"What about you? How have you been doing?"

"I'm doing alright, but I just can't seem to shake this stress off of me." He admitted.

"Why not? You should be the most relieved of us all."

"I don't know. Elric's been sent away to the highest and most dangerous peaks of the Aerbs, but I can't help but think he could come back." Fedrich laughed lightly. "I guess I'm just being paranoid, no one could survive those mountains for more than a day without the proper equipment. He's as good as gone."

“I agree.” Ruthy nodded. “You shouldn’t worry, things are going back to normal for us. We can go back to the fields and hunt the monsters, relax and spend time just talking, go back to those simpler days.”

“If you could call that simple.” Fedrich joked. “Hunting those monsters is just as hard as hunting down an entire group of Elrics.”

“I’d rather go after monsters any day.” She replied with a smirk. “At least they stay out your house.

“Agreed.”

The two remained silent for a long minute, both looking out into the crowded space within the walls of Lindblum. Fedrich glanced over towards Ruthy to see her looking back towards him, their eyes meeting for a moment. The two shared a brief smile before resuming their observation of the city, the silence enough to convey their unspoken words.

-End of Part One—

* ^ * ^ *

The Author Speaks!

Greetings and salutations, fellow readers! Once again I've inserted this strange and sometimes unnecessary little blip of information to make you all aware of the mundane and rather pointless struggles that I have in writing this story and it's effects regarding the end result I work towards, giving you an entertaining section of time that comes from scanning over this work I dare to call the culmination of my writing efforts. In other words, here's some info.

As you can see if you look up, this is the end of the first part of my story. I'll be taking some additional time before posting another chapter so I can make some minor fixes to the previous chapters, such as getting rid of any misspelled words. In the meantime, entertain yourselves by checking up on my website for some new stuff in the Information Database. Check my ff.net bio page for the link.

See ya later, kiddies.

Part Two, Chapter One

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Enjoy...

:Faraway Dreams:

Part Two: The Hunter And The Prey

Chapter One:

The sun burned brighter and hotter against the walls and streets of Lindblum in the summer season, the higher temperature drawing the hordes of people to seek the cover of a shady awning and the cool interior of the shops. Children ran about the streets with a greater enthusiasm, many of them seeking employment as normal workers went on their much anticipated vacations. The number of Airships

entering the city increased as people across the Mist Continent traveled to Lindblum to see the sights offered by the massive grand castle. Luckily, the populations of monsters remained low, and attacks remained below normal despite the increased level of ground travel by merchants and others. The Regulators, although having been through a stressing time two months ago due to the Fire Bandit, kept up their efforts and managed to even improve their efforts as the summer season wore on into it's latter half.

Gerick himself had fully recovered from his battle inflicted wound, but the damage left him with a minor limp that pestered him to no ends, especially on the battlefield he still stubbornly attended. Illis, too, made a full recovery from the burns across her body, remaining active in battle as well as in being sarcastic of her friends actions. Ruthy was able to rid herself of the fears and worries that plagued her mind, changing back into the cheery and carefree youth that was her trademark. Gordan, now free of his responsibility to protect Illis throughout the day and nighttime hours, resumed his studies and involved himself back into some of the social circles that he once attended, his image slowly becoming restored. Macky finally arranged the Security

Council meetings to a more reasonable hour, ironically losing many nights of sleep in pointless arguments to achieve his goal.

Fedrich, after a week of contemplation and thought, was also able to shake off the funk that soured his mood, returning back to the eager and confidant mindset that brought him to Lindblum. His training continued with Gordan and the others, his goal shifting back to attaining greater strength and skill for the ever-present Festival of the Hunt. After almost two months passed since the incident with the Fire Bandit passed, the Burman could visibly see the vast improvements he made in his strict regime of work and practice.

* * *

Dear Mum and Father, how are things back home? Life's been interesting to say the least since I left, hazardous to my health if you want something truthful.

I'm not sure if news has gotten to you over there, but there was a rash of violent robberies in Lindblum by a man known as the Fire Bandit about two months ago. My connection with him? Not but a day after I came here, I ran into a group of warriors known as the Regulators fighting monsters in the

fields. I stumbled into the fight by sheer luck, and they accepted me as a member once I proved that I was strong enough to fight. Normally my duties consist of fighting monsters outside the city and patrolling the travel lanes on the Plateau, but we were ordered to help catch the Bandit before he did any more harm. I haven't been hurt badly, so don't worry! The worst I've got was some singed fur because of the fire spells he uses, so my chest was nearly bare because of that. It's grown back completely since then, but I've decided to wear that thick shirt father gave me to stop that.

The Regulators themselves are all nice people, very different from one another as well. Gerick, the leader, is a friendly guy who always tries to keep the spirits up around here, but still works us hard each day. Gordan is of noble heritage, but his family was disgraced and he's working with us to help get his honor back, yet he still acts very well mannered despite that. Illis looks like your typical member of a gothic cult, but she's more caring of her friends than you'd think, although her tongue is sharper than any sword I've seen! Macky is the liaison between us and the Castle Security Council, so I don't see much of him since he's busy all day long. Ruthy is Illis' younger, redhead and carefree sister, and she's

probably the one who I connect with most out of everyone here.

I'm doing well in the group, and I think that I'm going to be able to make a good living here as a Regulator. Getting the Master Hunter title in the Festival is going to be easy if I keep on working as hard as I've been. Gerick let me take up residence in a spare room at their meeting Hall, so I've been keeping rather small confines as of late, but I don't have to pay much except half of my earnings as a Regulator for rent. Considering we can get almost three hundred Gil a day in selling monster hides, that's close to a thousand Gil a week that I earn, even with the deductions!

Lindblum itself is huge, words alone really can't give it justice! The city has many districts to separate places, like business shops and factories, theaters and museums, plus the Royal Castle itself. The food is good, and there's a lot more variety than what there is at the Daines Market. I haven't even been able to go to all the places I want to see, despite being here for so long. If you ever want to take a vacation from home, this place could keep you both busy for a year with the views and performances alone!

Oh bother, I'm already late for our morning patrol. Give aunt Mirideth a hug for me, tell Galt and the guys that I miss them dearly, and give Eliza a knock on the head if she hasn't fessed her feelings up to him!

Thinking of you always, Fedrich.

“Fedrich! I’m gonna tap a hole in my floor if ya don’t get here!” Gerick shouted from down the hallway.

“Just hold on a second, I’m almost done!” Fedrich begged, dropping the ink quiver once done.

Fedrich folded the parchment in half before rolling it into a small scroll, securing it with a piece of string. The Burman tied the knot securely, then grabbed his short sword and rushed out of his bedroom and into the front room, being looked at sternly by the collection of Regulator’s present. He bowed lightly to them in an apology, then lifted his letter up for them to see.

“Sorry I didn’t come right away, I just wanted to finish my letter so I can send it back home.”

“That is alright, Fedrich, I just do not want you to make a habit of being late to the patrols.” Gordan insisted.

“Right.”

“Come on, we can drop your letter off at a mailing office before going.” Illis suggested.

“Thanks.” Fedrich nodded, following the Regulators outside the Hall’s doors.

The warriors proceeded down the meandering streets of the Theater District with an easy gait, taking a detour so Fedrich could properly address and pay for his letter before boarded an Aircab destined for Hunter’s Gate. After passing through the massive tunnel, they proceeded down the large collection of stairs and finally stepped off the worn paths and took to their patrol of the city walls. For a few hours they marched through the thinning grass without encountering any monsters, and they even found themselves alone when moving through the city shadow. However, after they were within eyesight of the stairs leading to the Hunter’s Gate, Fedrich’s keen hearing picked up the not so subtle sound of monsters swarming towards them.

“Dammit!” Illis swore, hacking away at the multitude of limbs harassing her. “Ruthy! I need some support over here!”

“Right!” Her younger sister replied.

She aimed her longbow carefully, stringing an arrow and letting it fly into the side of a Carve Spider with deadly accuracy. The monstrous arachnid reared up in pain, and Illis used the opening to attack its head, dispatching the monster with a quick stroke. She quickly charged at another spider monster, her sword a blur as it cut through the leading appendages of the beast. A second flashing of a sword pierced the spider's side, and its wounds overcame its ability to remain standing, causing it to fall over and slowly die. Illis looked and saw Gordan again at her side, his broadsword up and aiming for another of the monsters swarming through their positions.

“How’s things going!?” Illis questioned.

“In our favor, despite the odds!” He returned, attacking. “Gerick and Fedrich have managed to blunt the efforts of the remaining monsters. This should be over quite soon!”

The two warriors ended their conversation and resumed battling, the monster’s forces thinning out quickly as the Regulator’s kept up their furious pace. An Iron Beak came storming across the grassy plains, its beak open wide and howling with primal rage at it’s opponents. Before either could respond to

it's charge, Fedrich dropped down from the sky and struck the beast down with a mighty crash, short sword driven through it's thick skull, ending it's life. The Iron Beak ground up a small path of dirt as it slowed to a halt, and both the warriors below took a moment to witness their comrades overly dramatic entrance.

"Good show!" Illis complemented.

"And now it's time for the final act!" Fedrich replied with a large grin.

Pulling his sword loose, he again took to the winds and leapt towards another monster with intent to kill. He aimed his sword down and let gravity do the work, the energy of the fall piercing an arachnid's body and shocking it into death. Looking up from his kill, he witnessed Gerick using his battle hammer to knock aside an iron beak, reversing his grip to use the pointed end to crack through the beast's head in a finishing strike. The few other monsters present all began to retreat, their limited intellect knowing enough to abandon a losing fight.

Fedrich jumped down from the corpse of the spider, walking towards the others as they assessed the scene.

“How’s everyone?” Gerick bellowed from his location.

“A bruise or two, but still good!” Illis replied for herself and Gordan.

“Alive! Sore, but alive!” Ruthy added.

“Up and able!” Fedrich answered. “And yourself?”

“Cuts ’n scratches, little else!” He chuckled.
“Let’s get this cleaned up!”

They all dispersed from one another and began dismembering the monsters for any valued materials. Gordan took to using his hammer to knock apart the shell of an Iron Beak while the others all used their blades to cut loose the fangs from the Carve Spiders present. After gathering the fangs, they helped to clean and pack the beak pieces Gerick’s hammer worked loose. They all shoulders their packs, Fedrich looking over the battlefield with a weary expression.

“Good grief, it looks like there’s enough beak leftover to require two more trips like this!”

“Yep, an’ we’ll be making good use of this opportunity to get it all in by sundown.” Gerick

replied.

“Seriously!?” Fedrich balked.

“Seriously,” The bearded man laughed. “There’s gotta be another few thousand Gils worth of beak here, and I’m not gonna let it go ‘ta waste when we’re this close to the Hunter’s Gate. Let’s get movin’, ladies!”

Fedrich and the others sighed, marching alongside their leader who kept his smile alive despite the work.

The sun traveled across the afternoon and evening sky without much occurring under its watch, and Gerick set down the final bag of beak shards just as it touched the ocean horizon.

“Good Gods, man ’ya really did a number on those monsters!” Corban swore, wiping his brow. “That’s almost a hundred ’n thirty kilo’s of the stuff!”

“We gave ‘em hell, alright! They’ll be keepin’ to the shadows fer weeks after smelling so many of their friends dead!”

“Feck it all, you already got 630 Gil fer the fangs alone, I’ll run dry ’o cash at this rate!”

“Speakin’ of which, what’s the goin’ rate for beak in the markets?” Gerick asked with a smirk.

“It’s doin’ about average, so it’ll be about twenty eight Gil a kilo.” He answered, balancing the last pile of beak on his scale. “That’s another thirteen kilos... so you got yerself in a hundred forty kilos in total.”

Corban stepped over to the table he worked at, picking up an inked quill and scribbling down the numbers into his thick recording book. Doing some math to work the total, he blew a whistle through his thick lips as he looked at the total.

“Damn, I think you broke ’ta records this time! You got yourself 3920 Gil for the beak, plus the 630 from the fangs, so it’s a grand sum of 4550 Gil!”

The Regulators all broke into wide grins at the news, Gerick looking pleased the most of them all. Corban reached under his table and picked up a large chest, unlocking it with a key at his neck to reveal a stash of coins glittering in the artificial light of the Hide Shop. He fished out a number of coins, piling them on the surface of the table until the total was reached.

“Gordan? How much is it between us?” Gerick asked.

“Let me see...” He muttered, doing the math in his head. “It should be... 910 Gil for each of us, so after the deduction, we each get 455 Gil.”

“That’s a helluva paycheck for ya! I’m sure you’re all glad we went through all this, eh?” Gerick questioned.

“More than glad, this is better than I’d thought!” Fedrich admitted with a smile.

“Alright then, let’s be gettin’ back to the Hall.” The elder man suggested, heading for the door. “Thanks for yer services, Corban!”

“No problem, jest don’t make a habit of this, or I’ll go broke!” He shot back.

The Regulators all gave their farewells, then stepped into the alley and left for the main street and the Aircab station. Ruthy giggled as she tossed her pouch of Gil from hand to hand, the leather bulging with coins, something Fedrich took note of.

“You seem happy.” He observed.

“I’ve got reason to be, I can finally pay for the last of my summer trip!”

“Summer trip, huh? Sounds like something you’ve been waiting for.”

“Oh it is, I just have to find someone who would want to share it with me.” She smiled.

“Well, care to tell us what it is?”

“I’ve been saving up a lot of Gil so I can afford two ticket to a performance by the Tantalus performance group in Treno, traveling costs included. They’re going to be doing ‘I Want To Be Your Canary’ By Lord Avon, the first time in almost two years!”

“Sounds like quite an event.”

“Yeah, I’ve been a fan of reading his works, although the Lindblum Libraries don’t have much on him.” She said in a milder tone. “Have you ever read his plays?”

Fedrich shook his head. “Nope, we don’t get much outside literature in Burmecia.”

“That’s a shame, you’d probably like some of his more adventurous works.”

“Probably...”

“Say...” She began. “Maybe you’d like to go along with me!”

“Me?” Fedrich repeated.

“Yeah! I was going to ask my sister if she wanted to, but she’s read his books too, so I think it would be better if you came in her place. I’m sure you’d love it!”

“Well, when is it happening?”

“They’re gonna be having two performances, one tomorrow night and the other the following night. I’ve held two ticket for the latter one, so we would leave that morning by Airship and land at South Gate, take the cable cars to Alexandria proper, then go by Chocobo caravan the rest of the way to Reno. We’d have enough time to get something to eat before the play, and maybe do some sight seeing afterwards. After a night’s stay at an Inn, we’d follow our steps back home in time for dinner.”

“You’ve got the whole thing planned out already?”

“Well yeah, I had to worry about reservations and everything, plus making sure I had the right tickets and border passes, too.” She explained.

“That’s a lot of work, just for a simple trip.”

“Ah, it’s not as much a hassle as it seems. So what do you think, do you want to come with me?”

Fedrich hesitated a moment. “What about the patrols? Is Gerick okay with us missing those two days?”

“He wouldn’t mind. We did just earn two days worth of Gil after all, so I’m sure he’d let us go.”

“If you can get him to agree, then I’d be glad to accompany you.”

“That’s great!” She exclaimed. “You’ll have the time of your life, believe me!”

The two followed the other Regulators through the thick crowds of people in the Aircab terminal, not bothering to speak above the din of other’s voices. Boarding an Aircab, they sat idly as the craft lurched through the evening air and progressed through the skies to the Theater District. The evening was pressing onto the city, all of the flying craft lighting their electric lamps to show their positions in the sky, filling the airspace with a swarm of dancing lights. The Aircab soared up towards the highest points of the city, following a strip of lights to land evenly into the Theater District

terminal. Once departing from the taxi and leaving the busy terminal, Ruthy again struck up the conversation with an eager expression.

“Have you heard anything about Lord Avon’s plays?”

“Not a thing, except that he was considered the greatest of all writers in his time and ours.” Fedrich replied.

“Yep, even after five hundred some odd years his plays are still better than anything else other writers have come up with. It’s like he set the standard for a play, so no one else could rival him.”

“I wonder what it must’ve been like during his time to see those plays. I wonder if they appreciated them as much as we do now?”

“Who knows? It’s something that I’m sure scholars will argue about for another five hundred years.” She snickered.

Fedrich looked up at the end of the stairs they walked on, recognizing the buildings. “We’re almost at the Hall, so you might as well ask Gerick if we can go before you go home.”

“Good idea.” She agreed, skipping ahead to the elder man’s side.

Gerick glanced over at the redhead. “Somethin’ you’d like to say?”

“Well, me ‘n Fedrich were wondering if you would give us two days off from patrols to go see the ‘I Want To Be Your Canary’ play in Reno the day after tomorrow.”

“I dunno, that’s a bit of a short term warnin’ you gave me.”

“Aw, don’t say that. We’ve done good work for these few months without a break, and we even made a big kill today! Don’t tell me that we haven’t earned some time for a rest.”

“I’m still not sure...” He continued, rubbing his beard idly.

“Please?” She pleaded, batting her eyes with a smile.

“Ach, enough ’o the cute stuff, kiddo, you can go.” He chuckled.

“Thanks a lot, Gerick!” She thanked, giving the man a quick hug. “I owe you one.”

She looked back to Fedrich and gave him a thumbs up, and the Burman smiled back and nodded.

Chapter Two

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Enjoy...

:Faraway Dreams:

Chapter Two:

“Ready to go?”

“Sure am.”

The two Regulators shouldered their packs and departed from the Hall, walking towards the Aircab station to take a short ride to the Lindblum Castle proper. Although a majority of traffic in the sky was from incoming and outgoing airships, they all made their final stops inside the massive Lindblum Airship Docks. From there, people could depart and

take a multitude of transit Aircabs to the city itself, and also important cargo and ship maintenance was dealt with while the Airships remained idle. Lindblum was considered the hub of transportation throughout the entire Mist Continent, and the Airship Docks was where it all happened from dawn to dusk, day after day.

Fedrich stretched his arms out as he walked by Ruthy's side, the two slowly heading to the Aircab terminal. He looked across the skyline of the city, the early morning light bathing the city in a hue of reds and oranges.

"Looks like it's gonna be pretty hot today." He commented.

"Probably. It'll be cooler in Treno, since it's in the Gaia Shroud."

"The 'Gaia Shroud'?"

"Yeah, the perpetual darkness that's all around the city and the Bentini Heights. The magical forces of the planet are more intense there than usual, and the result is that the natural sunlight is altered to look like moonlight."

"Kind of like the Eternal Rains of the Daines-Horse basin?"

“Yeah, it’s the same effect, it just has a different result.”

The two entered the Aircab terminal and boarded a taxi to the Airship Docks. After several minutes of near vertical flight, the small cab flew into the massive berths of the building and settled down into one of the lower regions. Fedrich and Ruthy stepped out and looked around, both of them thoroughly amazed at the sheer size of the structure.

“Rei’s vision...” Fedrich muttered.

“Come on, I think that our airship is a level above us.” Ruthy insisted, but not after taking a few seconds to absorb the mechanical beauty of the place.

She lead the way through the massive walkways of the Docks, workers running back and forth as they moved cargo and directed smaller Airships to their landing places. They walked up a large collection of stairs, ascending to the next level of the Docks, where several Exoudes class Airships were resting in their berths. The Exoudes class was a specially made craft that could hold a great number of people for travel to any location in the Mist Continent within half a day’s time.

“Which of these is the one we’re getting on?”

Ruthy reached into her pocket and checked a thick paper ticket. “It says that we’ll be on the *Montgomery*, and that it’s in berth B seven. Our departing time will be at nine thirty, and we should arrive at South Gate by one.”

Fedrich looked around, seeing a sign indicating where a collection of berths were, numbers four through eight.

“Looks like ours is down there.” He said, pointing towards the line of berths. “Four through eight.”

“Okay, we’ve got a half hour before the ship leaves, so there’s no rush.” Ruthy commented. “We can look around for a little, I’ve never been here before.”

The two struck out towards one of the massive Airships, the blue hull shining with a fresh layer of paint and boasting several images and labels of the craft’s owner. The mist engines, massive turbines that converted the innate energy of the mysterious fog into usable power, hummed steadily in their casings, ready to be activated and pushed to move the large vessel across the skies. Workers were

crawling across the hull, suspended by ropes and platforms, armed with an assortment of tools to fix any problems and to inspect the metal for cracks or missing bolts. People were walking back and forth, none of them looking to be in any hurry as they paced towards their destinations.

“It’s strange...” Fedrich commented. “I always envisioned larger Airships to be sleek and smooth, like ships of the sea. These things, they looks so bulky and unnatural, it’s tough to think that they really can fly.”

“Trust me, you’re not the only one thinking that.” Ruthy added. “I’ve never actually been on an Airship that goes outside the city. This’ll be as new an experience for me as it is for you.”

“Scared?”

Ruthy gave the Burman a look. “As much as you are.”

“Well then, why not get onboard our ship and take a tour?”

“Sounds like an idea.” She agreed.

The two changed directions and headed down the massive platform towards berth seven, seeing the

Exoudes craft hovering there as if held up by invisible ropes. Several logos were on it's hull from various wealthy companies, including a not-so-modest image of a young woman giving the viewers a seductive grin, the words 'Missus M' below. They passed underneath the vessel and found a set of movable stairs leading to a door in the hull. Climbing them quickly, they entered into the back of a large room filled with seats lined up in rows, a small collection of people already present and murmuring to one another.

"How modest." Ruthy muttered.

"Well, it's better than huffing it on foot." Fedrich insisted.

"Helluva lot safer, too." A third voice added.

Fedrich and Ruthy spun about to face the new voice, seeing an old man behind them resting on a cane. He tipped the worn out cap on his head, then pulled out a clipboard and slid a pencil free of his shirt.

"Alrighty... you two are?"

"Er... My name is Ruthy Killjoy, and he's Fedrich Castor. Who are you?"

“The name’s Jasoms, I’m the assistant captain ’o this ship.”

“Oh, well then, here are our tickets.” Ruthy apologized, pulling out the paper slips.

The elder Jasoms took the tickets and looked them over carefully, muttering to himself idly as he checked them to his clipboard. He the nodded and scribbled down a few words on the tickets and the board, then tore off the ends of the tickets and passed them back to Ruthy.

“Here are yer seat numbers. Have a good time.” He said with another tip of his cap.

Ruthy handed over Fedrich’s ticket piece, then looked out and tried to locate their seats. “Might as well get seated. It doesn’t look like there’s much to see...”

“Alright.” Fedrich agreed, motioning the young woman ahead.

Ruthy took the lead and walked down the center path, eventually finding their proper row and taking a seat in the smallish chairs. She looked around the large cabin, noticing a few small windows revealing the outside environment, but other than that, she felt as if they were resting in any other building.

“Looks to be a pretty dull flight.” She commented.

“Hopefully.” Fedrich added.

“Hmm? Are we still scared about this?”

“Trust me, if a mere minute long flight got me scared at first try, then four hours seems like it’ll make me snap!”

Ruthy chuckled. “Gods, Fedrich, you are hopeless.”

After waiting for the rest of the passengers to filter into the *Montgomery*, the Exoudes class Airship rumbled to life and slid its way out of the Docks and began it’s trip across the skies towards South Gate. The skies were mostly clear of any clouds, only a few strands of white moisture drifting in the heavens. The Airship traveled at a leisurely pace, dropping down towards the land to view the ocean as it passed below. The Ceebel River delta opened below them as they continued onward, leaving the ocean behind and coming upon the vast open plains and forests of the eastern Lindblum territory. Ruthy glanced outside, wondering which of those forests secretly protected her hometown. Fedrich remained within his seat, not chancing a

glance outside any of the windows to make sure that he didn't have a panic attack.

After a few hours of traveling across the sky, the Airship finally came within view of the massive South Gate, the round entrance already opening to accept it's charge. The craft settled into the berth, allowing for a few occupants to leave and continue their journey elsewhere, Fedrich and Ruthy included. The Burman looked around at the large gate, seeing the circular entrance closing itself with a deep rumble.

“So this is South Gate.” He murmured to himself.
“Why does it look familiar...?”

His fur ruffled as the answer came to him. *That's right... this was the place those people traveled through in that vision! They were in such a rush, and they caused a lot of damage to it...*

Fedrich shook the thoughts from his head, dismissing the memories from his mind as he followed Ruthy's confidant step to a destination beyond the dock. The two Regulators walked down several flights of stairs, eventually entering the massive waiting area for the Berkmea cable cars. People in droves were walking around, all the seats

taken as workers at their carts served up foods and sold their wares with an energetic motion.

“Goodness, this place is really crowded!” Fedrich exclaimed.

“Sure it is. This is the one place where people can cross from Lindblum to Alexandria, so it’s bound to be a busy place.”

“Well, now that I’m on solid ground again, maybe I can get something to eat and not risk it coming back up!” He laughed.

“Alright, let’s see what there is.”

The two walked into the mass of people, walking through the crowds of tables and carts, looking around for anything that tempted their curiosity. After a few minutes, they finally stopped in front of a small booth, looking at the sign with a curious stare.

“South Gate Bunt cake?” Fedrich read.

“Some kind of sweet bread, I guess.”

“Do either of ya want ’ta buy some?” The small demi-human at the cart asked.

“How much is a slice?” Ruthy asked.

“Only eight Gil, a bargain deal!” The baker pushed. “It’s sweet as honey and soft as a marshmallow!”

“Okay, I’ll take two.”

“Thanks a lot!” The baker cried, quickly gathering two slices and putting them into paper pouches.

Ruthy untied her pouch of Gil, fished out the proper coins to pay for the small meal, then passed them to the worker and accepted the two slices of cake. She passed one of Fedrich, then took a small bite of the bunt cake.

“Mm... sweet.” She commented after eating a small piece.

“Definitely.” Fedrich agreed, gulping down most of the treat. “It’s better than anything I’ve had!”

Before Ruthy could comment, a shrill whistle pierced the air of the waiting area, and immediately the people present began to shuffle towards a gate facing the Alexandrine border. The redhead looked to where the people were walking, and she heard the faint sound of grinding machinery rumble nearby.

“It must be the cable car arriving.” Ruthy figured, taking her slice of cake and putting it safely into a pocket on her pack. “We’d better get going.”

“Okay.” Fedrich muffled through the last remains of the cake.

The two quickly proceeded through the waiting area, passing over a large bridge to catch a glimpse of the Berkmea cable car between the forms of passerbys. The entire system of cars were dependent on one another, one set moving up the slopes of the Aerbs while the other descended, each pair connected by a length of powerful mythril cable. Each car could hold upwards to fifty people in the small seating area, and with several pairs of cars running back and forth from South Gate itself, it was never difficult to find space available.

Ruthy rummaged through another pouch that she stored their tickets in, then presented them to one of the workers at the station. He accepted them and gave them a thorough looking over, then earmarked them in his log and gave them back. Both Regulators passed by the worker and onto the metal grating next to the mammoth sized car, an engraved image of a horse giving them a stern look as they came through. After a few moments of walking

against the side of the car, they finally came to a sliding door that led to the well-maintained and luxurious interior.

“This looks a lot nicer than that Airship.” Fedrich muttered towards Ruthy.

“Yeah, I guess Lindblum and Alexandria wasted no expense working on this.” She replied.

The Burman’s ears twitched slightly. “Although it’s a lot louder.”

“Really? I can’t tell.”

“Trust me, my ears can tell the difference all too well.”

The cable car closed its door after all the passengers boarded, then with a lurch and screech of metal, the bulky transport began to slide down the rails leading to the borders of Alexandria. The cable car moved at a casual pace, the scenery of rocks and the far distant plains of the Bentini and Nolrich heights, clouded slightly by the perpetual mist of the land. Fedrich kept his eyes glued to the outside, watching as the landscape changed from warm plains of wild grass to more thick reeds and trees of the cooler Alexandria region. The mist too seemed to take a more dominant stance to the feature of the

land, pockets of it resting in the crevices between rocks and hanging between patches of trees.

After two hours of watching the scenery pass by, the cable car screeched loudly and slowed down, stopping at the station with a forceful lurch. The people all stood and moved for the exits, Ruthy and Fedrich some of the last people out of the area.

“You have your Border pass ready?” Ruthy asked.

“Yeah,” He replied. “Father arranged for me to get one before I left home in case I needed it.”

“Good, ’cause we’ll need one to pass through the Bentini Gates.” She reminded him.

The two walked down from the metal platforms of the cable cars, leaving the station behind and striking out towards the flattening fields of grass and reeds. They looked out across the massive Zamo Basin as they crossed a modest wooden bridge, the mist coursing thickly through the forests and slight hills of the depression in the earth. The dim form of the Ceebel River snaked casually through the area, rounding a bend to where it mysteriously disappeared beneath the Aerbs and reappeared in the King Ed plains of Lindblum.

“The Mist here is really thick.” Fedrich finally commented. “It’s barely noticeable in Lindblum or Burmecia.”

“Yeah, that is strange. It’s probably because it has nowhere to go in the basin and just collects over time.”

Fedrich nodded, having heard of the dangers the mist posed when it was breathed too much. He wondered how the people’s health fared when it was so visible. Spying the raised walls and iron barriers of the Gate, he reached into his vest and pulled out the thick fold of paper. They approached the small hut that a guard sat in, giving the man their papers for him to look over. With an approving grunt, he gave them back and motioned for someone else to unlock the gate and open it for the travelers to pass.

“So now we need to find that caravan.” Ruthy spoke, recalling her notes on the trip.

“How long will that part of the trip take us?” Fedrich asked, keeping step with her quick pace.

“Four hours, I think. It’s better than buying tickets to take a local Airship to the city, they wanted more money than I get in a month for them!”

Fedrich snorted in disapproval. “How do they expect anyone to buy them at that kind of cost?”

“Treno is filled with greedy nobles and businessmen looking to get every last Gil they can from anyone, so it’s no surprise. They probably don’t want us mere commoners to dirty their precious aircraft.”

“Might as well look on the brighter side, at least now we can see what Alexandria is like close up.”

Ruthy offered a smile. “Yeah, I guess it’s better this way.”

“Speaking of which, Chocobos ahead.” Fedrich said, pointing a clawed finger towards a gathering of them near some stables.

Looking ahead, the redhead saw Chocobos milling around a few feeding troughs, several travelers standing near a large man who was motioning around the area. The two Regulators joined the gathering to listen to the last few instructions the man gave, then selected their rides and climbed on. With a wave of his arm, he began the long trip to Treno with the other travelers following behind, Chocobos warking amongst themselves as they proceeded onwards.

Chapter Three

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Enjoy...

:Faraway Dreams:

Chapter Three:

“Whoa...” Fedrich breathed, eyes wide.

“I agree.” Ruthy finished, her gaze tracing across the cityscape.

The two stood at the edge of the Surveyor’s Square, looking over the massive landscape of Reno’s various buildings. The massive Card Arena stood prominent in the center of the city, pathways and small canals strewn around the area as fires and electric lights flickered in the dark. The sky,

magically altered to it's nighttime appearance, was devoid of stars and merely held the sun in it's exposure, moonlight gently illuminating the city.

"So this is the sleepless city." Ruthy continued. "I never thought it would look so elegant."

"Wonders never cease. I never imagined such a place existed."

"You've never heard of Reno?"

"No. Like I've said, we don't get much outside influence back home."

"Well, I've heard of this place, but nothing compares to the real thing."

Fedrich nodded. "So where is the play being held?"

Ruthy pulled out more tickets from her pouch, shuffling through them until she found the proper ones. "It says that it will be in the Grand Maria Amphitheater at eight 'o clock. I have no idea where that is."

"Maybe we should ask around."

"Sure." She agreed, motioning to one of the listless guards near the entrance. "They ought to

know.”

The two approached one of the guards, and Fedrich took the lead to ask.

“Excuse me, but could you point out where the Grand Maria Theater is?” The Burman asked.

“It’s by King’s Auction House.” The Guard muttered.

“...And where’s that?” Fedrich continued.

The Guard sighed, then pointed an armored finger towards a point in the city. “Look, you see the Arena out there? The Theater is just beyond it on the canal pathways. You’d have to be blind if you can’t find it from there.”

“Okay. Thanks.” Fedrich said with a grumble.

The two walked towards the Arena, leaving the square and entering the vast walkways that crisscrossed the canals and connected buildings to one another. People were busily walking through the city pathways, many of them looking either extremely rich or very poor, of noble appearance or treacherous gaze. Ruthy kept her steps close to Fedrich’s side, little fears rising as she saw many unsavory types looking her over.

“He was certainly rude.” The redhead commented.

“Yeah, the guards shouldn’t be so... standoffish.”

“Maybe he’s just sick of pointing the amphitheater out to tourists like us.”

“Maybe, but everyone else seems to act like him.” Fedrich added. “I guess this isn’t just a friendly city to outsiders.”

“Well, let’s not let a grumpy bunch of people get us down! We’ve come for a good show, so we might as well make the best of our time and enjoy the sights!”

Fedrich grinned, Ruthy’s chipper attitude rubbing off. “Maybe we can get something to eat before going to the performance?”

“Okay, sounds like a good idea.”

Fedrich looked around the area, hoping to find some kind of eatery open for business. After walking for several minutes, pacing a wide circle around the Arena, Ruthy’s sharp eyes finally saw a modest cafe open just beyond the canals. The two entered the restaurant and were presented with a dimly lit bar, people filling the tables while cigar

smoke drifted lazily around. A worker led them to a small table tucked into a corner, giving the two a simple menu before walking away.

“Oh brother...” Fedrich muttered. “The selection here is just as strange as it was in Lindblum on my first day...”

“It’s not all that different, there’s plenty of drinks and sandwiches I recognize.”

“True... I guess I’ll have their spiced fish sandwich.”

Ruthy waved a worker to their table once one came near, and the two ordered their meals and drinks, paying for the food up front. The two looked around the restaurant for a idle minute, observing the people as they chattered loudly and played cards with onlookers betting their precious Gil. A worker came to their table with her arms filled with plates, and she set the arrangement down before the two and bid them a good evening. Just before they started eating, a man dressed in a neat and orderly set of clothes stood up on a raised section of the floor and called out for attention.

“G’evening, everyone, and thanks for coming,” The man began. “Tonight we’ve got a special guest

here straight from the hallowed halls of the Alexandria musical school. The Playwright's Bar 'n Grill is pleased to present the man with fingers of ivory... Rod Dougin!"

The patrons all clapped lightly as a man dressed in formal attire stepped to the raised area and sat down at a grand piano that the shadow seemed to have hidden. With a shuffle of papers and the crack of his knuckles, the man began playing out a gentle tune while singing, his gravel like voice speaking of the many ways he would express his heart to his love. Fedrich and Ruthy listened for a while, but the smell of their meals took their attention and they began eating instead.

"Interesting music." Fedrich commented. "It's nothing like the music back home."

"What is it like, then?" Ruthy asked.

"Well, most musicians stick to stringed instruments or flutes and the like. It's more upbeat, I guess, and there's not much singing either. You'd only have music playing if you intended to dance, so a faster pace is kind of needed."

"And did you ever dance?"

Fedrich coughed. “No... I’ve got two left feet, I think is what they say.”

“How strange! The fast and fleet-footed warrior of us all and he can’t manage a few simple steps.” Ruthy snickered.

“Hey now, I’ll have you know that our dances probably have a hundred steps a minute or more!” Fedrich spoke, attempting to defend himself. “Then there’s trying to dance with another person alongside you, it’s tough work! Mother told me there are women who’ve dedicated their entire lives to perfecting their dances.”

“Wow. I guess your people take their work seriously, even dancing.” She said with raised eyebrows.

“Yes, although, there aren’t many dancers in Burmecia. The Tree City Cleyra has a lot of dancers, since they don’t train for war or anything else.”

“Huh...” Ruthy exhaled, thinking on his words.

“What about you? Do you know how to dance?” Fedrich asked with an evil smile.

Ruthy felt a blush tinge her face. “Er... well... not exactly.”

A while after they finished their meals, Fedrich and Ruthy continued their walk around Reno in search of the amphitheater. The number of people in the streets seemed to increase as time wore on, along with more shops opening and more sounds reaching their ears. As they passed the Arena, swarms of people walked around the entrance as they created a din of sound, all of it revolving around the game of cards, Tetra Master. Ruthy insisted on stopping to watch a few games being played outside the arena, and they observed two kids playing quickly with colorful cards with the pictures of monsters on them.

“You get it?” Ruthy whispered to her friend.

“Not at all.” Fedrich replied.

After watching the kids play without understanding how they kept track of the score or who won, they gave up and walked away from the Arena towards the upper levels of the city’s walkways. As they walked up a narrow flight of stairs, the two of them passed by a strange man with four arms and a collection of odd clothes on his body. The multi-armed man bumped against Fedrich as they crossed paths.

“’scuse me.” The man apologized.

“Sure.” Fedrich replied.

The two parted, but Fedrich felt something strange about the parting. He absently ran his hands across his belt, and surprisingly felt that the pouch of Gil he secured on his waist was missing. Panicking, he felt all around his waist and looked about his body, and surely enough, he couldn’t find the jingling pouch anywhere. He looked back quickly, seeing the man continuing down the stairs with a quick pace.

“Excuse me, sir, but did—” Fedrich started.

The man quaked for a moment while looking back, but stopped his motion and took off running on fast feet.

“Ruthy!” Fedrich shouted, doubling back to pursue the thief.

The redhead looked to back to see Fedrich race after the thief, and she quickly followed suit and ran after the Burman. Fedrich’s quick feet gave him an advantage to chase the bandit, who presently was shoving onlookers aside with ease motions of his four arms. Ruthy continued after them, testing her endurance as they tried to keep up with the fleet footed men.

“Stop!” Fedrich barked.

“Ya gotta catch me first!” The four-armed bandit insisted.

Fedrich growled, then jumped up and took to the air, hoping to catch the bandit off guard. Landing in front of the thief, he spun around and balled his fist in time for the bandit to crash into it, halting the pursuit with a loud crack. The four armed man fell back to the cobblestone ground, holding his face with two arms while supporting his body with the other two.

“Aya, you musta broke my nose, you whore-spawn!” The thief cursed.

Fedrich drew his short sword and pointed it down at the man. “You have something of mine. Give it back, please.”

The bandit hesitated a moment, but quickly drew out two daggers from his belt and slapped Fedrich’s blade away. He jumped to his feet and held the blades menacingly for a moment, then jumped to attack. Fedrich used his short sword to parry and block the two weapons away, keeping his ground as the bandit tried to hit flesh. The thief managed a lucky swipe of his dagger, a thin line of blood

forming across the Burman's hand. Fedrich stifled a curse and continued to defend himself, finally stepping back to avoid another wound. The thief held his daggers menacingly, smiling widely with his yellowed teeth.

“Heh heh, you better back off 'n leave, rat!”

Fedrich regained his feet and brought his sword up defensively, ready to attack as he glared at his opponent. Ruthy finally arrived at his side, breathing deeply as she looked at the two in their standoff. She quickly pulled her longbow free from her shoulder and uncovered her quiver of arrows, drawing one in and tensing the string. Fedrich glanced back to see Ruthy ready, and he focused back to the bandit with a grin.

“Now you're outnumbered. Just give me my money back and you can go free.”

“Err...” The bandit muttered, faltering.

“Just give him his money,” Ruthy added. “I'll get you with an arrow if you try and run.”

“Heh, like you'd be able 'ta—”

Before the multi-armed thief could continue with his threat, an arrow shot out from Ruthy's longbow

and struck one of his daggers, knocking the weapon out of his grip. Ruthy pulled another arrow from her quiver and tensed it, aiming for the bandit's body with lethal intent. The thief backed away, dropping his remaining dagger as he waved his arms in desperation.

“Ah! Don’t! Here, take it, just don’t kill me!” The bandit pleaded, tossing the pouch down by Fedrich’s feet.

Fedrich approached and bent down to pick up the pouch, keeping his eyes on the thief’s every move. He picked up the pouch and dropped it into a pocket on his belt, then stepped back towards Ruthy’s side.

“Alright, now get going, and don’t you steal from anyone else again.”

“Right, right!” The thief apologized before dashing away into the crowds of people that watched the altercation.

Ruthy unstrung her arrow and returned it with the others, slinging her bow across her shoulders as Fedrich sheathed his short sword. Fedrich checked the wound on his hand, seeing that it wasn’t deep enough to be a danger, just enough to spill blood.

“What a strange guy.” Ruthy commented.

“Yeah, this place is more dangerous than I thought. We’d better keep a safe hold on our Gil unless someone else tries to steal from us.”

The redhead looked towards her companion, seeing him tending to his injury. “Did he get you?”

It’s just a scratch, really, nothing— “Fedrich began.

“Let me see it!” She insisted, taking his hand and staring intently at the cut. “I wouldn’t want you to get an infection because of that. I’ve got some bandages with me, just hold on a sec.”

Fedrich raised his brows in surprise. “You really packed for everything, huh?”

She nodded. “You never know when danger can come. I made sure to pack enough medications in case we were attacked by monsters during the trip. Your hand, please?”

Fedrich offers her the injured limb, and she quickly wrapped it in several layers of medical bandage and secured a knot at the base of his thumb. She checked to make sure of her work, then pushed a potion into his hand, stuffing the remaining tape into her pockets.

“Drink it up, we can’t have you bleeding all night long.”

“Sure.” He accepted, swallowing the thick concoction.

Ruthy nodded at her handiwork, then checked her pocketwatch. “Blast it, now we’ve got twenty minutes to find the amphitheater thanks to that thief!”

“Well, we just passed the Arena, so it’s got to be somewhere around here.” Fedrich thought, looking around the area. “It might be somewhere on the upper paths of the city.”

“Hey, look!” Ruthy exclaimed, pointing up to a pathway high above them. “That’s a banner from Tantalus, the play must be being held up there!”

“But how’re we going to get there? There are no stairs leading near that path.”

“I don’t know...”

Fedrich looked up for a few moments, then was struck with an interesting idea. He glanced around the area, seeing that they were surrounded by cobblestone paths running parallel to two canals filled with dark water. There were few people about

the area, and the walkways above looked to be as sparsely populated.

It looks about twenty meters up there. Yes... it just may work!...

With a humored grin, he looked to see the redhead glancing back towards the stairs they just descended. He approached her and placed a hand on her shoulder to get her attention.

“Ruthy, do you trust me?” He asked.

“Huh?” She muttered.

“I asked if you trust me.” Fedrich repeated.

“Well... yes, yes I do trust you.” She answered.
“But what does—”

The Burman smirked. “Then hold on tight!”

Giving Ruthy a tug, he swung his arms below her, picked her up swiftly by the legs and shoulders to his chest, then crouched down and leapt up into the sky. The redhead gave a squeal of surprise as the two sailed into the air, eventually coming to pass above the walkway with the Tantalus banner. As guessed, the expansive half-circle arrangement of the Grand Maria opened up before them, Fedrich’s jump landing them on the uppermost edges of the

amphitheater next to a usher bearing a stunned expression.

“Good Gods, Fedrich!” Ruthy gasped. “That was... unexpected!”

“But quick, eh?” He laughed.

“Most definitely.” She agreed with a snicker.

The two stood idle for a moment before Ruthy squirmed in Fedrich’s arms.

“Eh, Fedrich?” She began.

“Hmm?”

“Could you put me down?”

Fedrich felt a blush taint his face, safely covered by his gray fur as he let her down to her feet.
“Sorry.”

“Might the two of you explain yourselves!?” The usher asked, eyes wide in surprise.

“Sorry, we’re just here to see the performance.” Ruthy apologized, reaching into her pockets. “Here are our tickets for it.”

The usher looked them over carefully, then tore them in half and returned the halves bearing the

official marking of authenticity. “Seating is first come first serve, so it would be wise to find seating right away. Enjoy the performance.”

“We will.” Fedrich offered.

The two walked by the usher and descended the stairs dividing the circular arrangement of seats into differing sections, keeping their eyes open for the closest opening to sit at. Fedrich found suitable seats, and the two sat down to the delight of their feet and awaited the beginning of the play. After a while of waiting in silence, the stage opened up and revealed the platform that the actors walked on, and the crowds drew silent as lights focused on the front. A large looking man dressed in costume of a king approached the stage, facing the crowd and motioning with his arms to quiet them.

“Ladies and Gentlemen! Tonight’s performance is a story that takes place long, long ago. Our heroine, Princess Cornelia, is torn from her lover, Marcus. She attempts to flee the castle, only to be captured by her father, King Leo. When our story begins, Marcus, having heard of this, crosses swords with the king.” He stopped a moment, raising a hand to motion to the people in the audience. “And now, noble ladies and lords, and our uppermost viewers,

Tantalus proudly presents *I want to Be Your Canary!*"

The crowds cheered and clapped, and the man left the stage to the left. From the right, a group of three young looking men approached, weapons drawn.

"Bereft of father! Bereft of mother! Marcus! Thou has lost even thy love!" A patched boy declared.

"Fortune hath escap'd thee! For what end shalt thou live?" A short, stocky man with a hammer added.

A blonde finally stepped up, raising his weapon. "For the sake of our friends... Let us bury our steel in the heart of the wretched King Leo!"

"Aye!" The other two agreed, stepping up to the center stage as four others came forward, weapons drawn. A man with a bandana tied across his face rested, sword ready as the King and two of his clawed men stood at his side.

"We shall back thee, kinsman!" The blonde man announced.

The man, Marcus, shook his head. “Pray, sheathe thy swords! This villain is mine alone!”

“Nay, kinsman! For I, too, have lost a brother to this fiend!” The stocky man informed, hefting his hammer with a steady grip.

The King laughed loudly, swinging his sword arrogantly. “What ho? Out, vermin! Away! Thou darest bare thy sword before the king!? All who stand in my way will be crush’d!”

The blonde growled in defiance. “Treacherous Leo, my kinsman’s suffering shall not be in vain! For I shall instruct thee in his incomparable pain!”

The two groups engaged in battle, swords and weapons clashing with an intense fury. Strange magics were cast as well, fireballs engulfing the bodies of friend and foe and spheres of energy raining down pain on any within their reach. After minutes of conflict, Marcus delivered a powerful strike against King Leo, halting the battle.

“Arrg... Grr... Thou hast not seen the last of me, Marcus!” Leo swore.

“Come back!” The blonde shouted, pursuing.

Without warning, the patched boy stepped forward and blocked the others path, sword ready as he glared towards his comrade.

“Out of the way, Blank!” The blonde ordered.

“Consider this, Zidane! If Prince Schneider were to marry Princess Cornelia, peace would reign over both their kingdoms!” Blank considered, stepping forward in range of his weapon. “Is such a goal of more desire than the love of one man?”

“’Tis foolishness!” Zidane bellowed, readying his own sword. “If all were so easy, why, none would suffer in this world!”

The two warriors raced up onto a landing, swords clashing with expert motions. The two then ran down to the stage and onto the lowest pathways of the amphitheater, weapons ringing out as they fought. Fedrich watched the battle with interest, something about the two young men battling striking his memory. The two lashed out with a cry, swords locking as they stared at one another in disgust.

“Expect no quarter from me!” Zidane warned.

“We shall finish this later!” Blank shouted back, leaping from the battle and running to the right of the stage in retreat.

Fedrich thought hard about the two. *What is it about them? I feel that I know the for some reason, but what?*

“Nay! Come back, fiend!” Zidane called, chasing after the man. “Cinna! Marcus! Do not let that treacherous King escape our reach!”

“Aye, kinsman!” Cinna agreed, following the path King Leo took. “Marcus!”

“I shall retire for the moment, friend! Follow the King in my place, I have yet another meeting to attend.” Marcus waved, standing to run for another end of the stage. The curtains closed as they prepared the next scene, but Fedrich paid little heed to that fact as he thought hard over the identity of the two actors.

“So what do you think?” Ruthy asked her friend. “Do you like it?”

“Oh... yes, it’s very well done.” He replied after a moment.

Ruthy gave him a curious look. “Are you okay? You look like you woke up from daydreaming.”

Fedrich’s eyes widened, suddenly, his body going rigid as he finally remembered where his knowledge

of the two actors came from.

That vision! They came from my vision!! That phantom told me that they would help save Gaia from destruction, but I didn't think that it was true! But they were right in front of me, clear as day! If those two kids really do exist... then, that dream must really be true as well!!

* * *

“Gods, I’m tired.” Fedrich moaned.

“So am I.” Ruthy agreed. “Good thing the Inn’s close by.”

The two entered the Inn, walking to the front desk where the worker sat waiting eagerly for customers to his establishment. Ruthy reached into her pocket and pulled free the last ticket she purchased for the trip, putting it in front of the worker’s eyes.

“Hello. I’ve rented out two room for the night.” Ruthy informed the man.

The worker looked at the ticket with beady eyes, then back at the redhead. “No you didn’t...”

“...Yes I did.” Ruthy corrected. “I specifically asked to rent out rooms fifteen and sixteen in this

Inn.”

“Except this receipt says that ya rented out room fifteen only.” He again noted, pushing the paper to her. “Look, unless my eyes’ve gone bad, I only see a fifteen there.”

Ruthy sputtered. “But I... I made absolutely sure...”

“Look, missy, you’ve got a room for the night, so be happy. Most places here get rented out completely when a play is held.” The worker explained evenly.

“Well, can I *rent* another room?”

“Yes you can, if we have a room to spare, which we don’t.”

Ruthy’s expression fell greatly. “Then...”

“You have that room only? Yes, and I’m sorry about it, but what can I do?”

The redhead sighed heavily. “Alright, I’ll take it.”

“Glad to hear it.” The man nodded, taking the receipt and giving her the key for room fifteen.

The two Regulators walked up the flights of stairs to the third floor, then proceeded down the hall to the door marked with a fifteen. Unlocking the door and opening it, the two stood mute as they saw the so described luxury accommodation was limited to a table, two chairs, and one bed.

“One bed, I see.” Fedrich muttered, unimpressed.

“Dibs.” Ruthy called with a smirk.

“No worries, the floor looks nice and comfy.” Fedrich replied with a sour expression.

^ * ^ * ^

The Author Speaks!

Greetings and Salutations, my fellows! I’d like to start and end this note with an apology for two items. One, I’m sorry that the previous chapter was rather lackluster in action or much of a point, but I felt that I needed to describe their trip to Reno somehow. Two, I’m sorry that this chapter took a long time to get out. finals have been plaguing me for the past week, so my time for writing has been replaced for time to study for tests. Unfortunately, I’ll be heading up north for Christmas, so the next chapter will sadly be either very early or very late in comparison to others.

On other notes, if anyone even cares much, I got some inspiration for the middle section of the story about the artist Rod Dougin from an actual singer, Rob Dougan. You might recognize his name from the Matrix series, since he did some music for them. If by any chance you have his CD, Furious Angels, I was listening to the track Drinking Song to describe that scene.

Oh well, have a happy holiday season in any case, peeps. Later!

Chapter Four

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Enjoy...

:Faraway Dreams:

Chapter Four:

“Thanks be to Goddess Rei that we’re finally home.” Fedrich breathed.

“Come now, it wasn’t that bad a trip, was it?” Ruthy asked.

“I didn’t mean it that way, I just meant that it is good to be back home.” The Burman corrected.

“Heh, alright.” The redhead nodded.

The two Regulators walked up the final flight of stairs to the square the Hall rested on, seeing the early evening sun spread it's red and orange hues across the building. The sky was still filled with Airships, the light sound of mist engines echoing in the air as the two warriors entered the Hall to see both Gerick and Gordan sitting at the central table with mugs in hand.

“We’re back!” Ruthy announced, drawing their eyes.

“Well well, did ya enjoy your little break?” Gerick asked.

“It was a very... unique experience.” Fedrich answered. “The play was spectacularly done, and the city itself was a sight to see!”

“It is good to have you both back, we have all missed you.” Gordan said with a smile.

“Yeah, it’s good to be back.” Fedrich commented.

“So what’s gone on since we left? Anything interesting, maybe?” Ruthy asked.

“Nah, things’ve been ordinarily boring as usual.” Gerick chuckled. “Ya don’t really come to expect

life 'ta throw you much anything new when all you do is hunt fer monsters."

"Ah, sounds like we left in time, then." The redhead snickered in reply.

"Although it is not of much importance, I received a letter from my uncle just yesterday. He told me that he would be coming to Lindblum to visit with my parents and to tour the Zebolt Airship Factory for a few days, so I might be inclined to take a vacation of my own." Gordan added.

"I didn't know you had an uncle." Ruthy commented.

"Well, he generally is not much for social visits. Mother considers him the black sheep of her family, what with his womanizing and his general lack of manners. Despite that, it will be nice to see him again."

"Sounds like a nice guy." Fedrich deadpanned.

"He is as normal as any random person, just not upright and noble as my family would wish him to be. Most of their disappointment comes from the fact that he is the heir to the family name and it's massive monetary investments."

“What kind of money?”

“He is heir to the Gestahl Industrial company, a business that supplies the Lindblum Airship Factory with materials for constructing the hulls of Airships.”

“What!?” Ruthy gasped. “He’s the son of Edvard Gestahl?”

Gordan nodded. “Yes.”

“So then, your mother was originally a Gestahl before she married?”

“Again, yes. If it were not for him being older than my mother, she would have been in line to inherit the family business.”

“Gods, I didn’t think that your family was so... prestigious.” The redhead whistled.

“Well, it is not something I tend to speak of much.”

“Embarrassed that yer practically loaded with rich relatives?” Gerick joked.

“It is not proper to go about bragging of one’s wealth.” The nobleman shot back. “Anyway, since my father has invited me to come with him on the

tour of the factory, I do not think it would be trouble if anyone here would like to accompany me as well.”

“Sounds like fun.” Illis nodded.

“Yeah!” Ruthy added.

“Now hold on a sec, ladies, I can’t have ya abandonin’ yer job again.” Gerick insisted. “It’s been tryin’ enough to cover for Fedrich ‘n Ruthy’s leave, I won’t have the lot of you leavin’ this to me.”

“Aw, it’ll just be for a day.” Ruthy whined.

“You especially!” The bearded man continued. “Now I know that it’ll be a good time, but you just came back from yer play! Unless you want ’ta forget about yer job entirely, you’ll be ready fer tomorrow’s patrol.”

“Oh alright.” She agreed forlornly.

“Do you have any qualms about my attending the tour?” Gordan asked.

“Nah, you’ve earned a break.”

“Thank you for understanding.” Gordan thanked with a nod. “Uncle Setzer ought to be here in a day or two, so I will have my parents send a message as

soon as he does. I should be gone for no more than two days.”

The following afternoon, a messenger from Gordan’s house arrived at the Hall with invitation for his arrival to his parents home. Excusing himself from his duty, he left with the messenger to the Industrial District, where his parents owned their manor amidst the vast factories of their business. Gordan was glad to again be within the familiar streets of his home. Despite the tragedy that fell to his family name, his great uncle Edvard was more than willing to assume control of the Gestahl Industry in Lindblum. The arrival of Setzer was a good chance to see how his family’s honor and reputation have recovered, knowing well that his position in the Regulator’s didn’t give him room to view his standings in society.

The twin doors of the manor opened widely, the messenger dismissing himself as Gordan stepped inside to the front room. He quickly saw his parents sitting in an overstuffed couch, another figure in a ornate and floor length coat standing nearby with a goblet of drink in hand.

“Mother, father, uncle, I have returned.” Gordan announced.

“Oh, my son, you’re—”

“Hold on a moment, sister.” The cloaked man insisted, raising a hand. “Please let me tell him.”

Gordan’s mother hesitated, but nodded her approval. The cloaked man turned to face Gordan, revealing that he was indeed his uncle Setzer Gestahl. Dressed in the finest clothing, he appeared as noble as ever, silvered hair spilling across his shoulders to rest at his chest.

“Nephew Gordan, it’s good to see you!” Setzer began, stepping to his relative to embrace him. “How have you been? Things have been mighty rough for your parents since the scandal.”

“I am well, uncle. How are you doing?”

Setzer’s expression fell quickly, a sigh escaping his lips. “Truth be told, m’boy, things aren’t looking good at all.”

“How so?”

“You remember that your great uncle Edvard was the person to take up the reigns of the business once the scandal hit, and he managed to keep it from going under at his own troubles. Sadly, he hasn’t

been in good health these past months, and... he died, just last week.”

Gordan was stunned at the news. “What happened to him?”

“The resident doctor told us that it was probably a failure of his heart. Spirit willing, but his frail body couldn’t keep up with the demands the business required...”

“My apologies, uncle, I did not wish to stir sad thoughts.”

“It had to be said, no way around it. The reason I’m here in the first place was to overlook the Zebolt Factory because of his death. His will stated that in the event of his death, the male heir of the family name would oversee the competition of the Lindblum factories and assume control of the Gestahl industrial plant. He wished that the business was to be sold to the best company available if no one could assume control.”

“How ludicrous!” Gordan spat. “Surely you will not allow the family business to be sold like some mistreated statue!”

“Don’t go jumping to conclusion, now! I have full intent to assume command of the Gestahl

Industry and keep it afloat, I merely wished you to know the circumstances of my rise to control. After I tour the Zebolt factory, I'll return here and have property acquired for my move to Lindblum."

"So what was my reasoning to come home? Was it only to let me know of the change of power?"

"Come now, I'm not that stiff a person! I invited you here so I could see how my nephew has been doing. Your parents too have been curious as to your condition, what with your fighting monsters like some cheap soldier for hire."

Gordan laughed politely. "Uncle, working for the Regulators has offered a good change of pace for me. I have experienced a great many things during my time there. Moreso, the Regulators are hardly a ragtag collection of hoodlums, they are a well respected organization recognized by the Lindblum Armies."

"Well, to each his own, as they say." Setzer nodded with an idle smile. "Let's be on our way, Zebolt himself is waiting for our arrival to the factory, and I doubt that he will appreciate me being late."

“Sir Setzer Gestahl! It is an honor to meet your acquaintance!” Zebolt greeted, offering a furry paw.

Setzer accepted the handshake with a firm grip. “It’s good to meet you as well, Sir Zebolt, but I prefer being addressed without such formalities.”

“As you wish, Setzer.” Zebolt nodded, turning to Gordan. “I don’t believe we’ve had the pleasure.”

“I am Gordan Fulmen, Setzer’s nephew. The pleasure is mine, Zebolt.” The Regulator informed while offering a handshake.

Zebolt accepted, then turned and waved his lanky arms around his massive factory. “Come now, let the tour commence!”

The trio began walking down the extensive lengths of catwalks leading around the circular heights of the factory, workers below scrambling through their day’s efforts.

“As you can see, the Zebolt Industrial Factory has full usage of the vast electrical and mechanical equipment needed for Airship construction courtesy of Lindblum’s own charity. Whereas Regent Cid works on the more experimental and revolutionary Airship models, we here help to manufacture the

larger models of Airships from Freighter class to Viltgance class.”

Motioning to his left, Zebolt drew on a half-completed Viltgance hull as an example. “The raw material for the Airships is imported from mines and forges located all across the Lindblum territories, mainly from Stony Point and it’s vast mythril deposits. Once the parts are completed, the newly made parts are shipped over here and assembled on these cranes and suspension belts. It can take a hundred workers nearly three months to assemble a Viltgance Airship from the necessary parts, adding up to nearly one hundred thousand hours of work put into each craft. The massive shield and spear at the front of the Airship is the heaviest part of the Viltgance, made almost of pure mythril and forged to absolute perfection. Many people believe it to be a decorative item, but the ship is more than able to ram another Airship at speeds up to thirty kilometers an hour with the spear.”

“Have there ever been any cases of the spear being used?” Setzer asked.

“None officially, although there was an accident when a dragon was impaled by the lance and nearly set the Viltgance on fire in its death throes. Aside

from that, it has never been used against another Airship.”

“What kind of firepower does the Viltgance have?” Gordan asked afterward.

Zebolt scratched his chin. “I cannot give exact numbers, as it is secret by order of the military. However, I can say that each shell from the main guns has enough explosive power to put a forty meter wide and fifteen meter deep crater into soft earth. The support guns aren’t as powerful, but are still able to render most materials into rubble on their own.”

“Impressive.” Gordan mused. “Considering I have seen more than nine different Viltgances on patrol through the city, it seems that the arsenal that Lindblum possesses is unmatched anywhere on Gaia.”

“Well, better to be safe than sorry. We wouldn’t want to end up facing another crisis like the Mist Wars of the 1770s.”

Setzer shuddered. “Dark times. Thank goodness the previous Regent was able to bring unity back to the land.”

“Yes, but back on topic, here is our final testing ground.” Zebolt nodded, pointing towards a finished Freighter in dock. “Here we do extensive testing of the Mist engines we receive from the above factories. In the dock, an Airship is secured to the frame of the entire building and is tested to see how it’s frame can withstand the forces of the engine. If the Airship is too stiff or too weak, the engines would break apart and separate from the craft with disastrous results. I’m proud to say that in the fourteen years since we opened the doors here, we haven’t had a single engine failure in the docks.”

“An impressive record.” Setzer commented.
“What of accidents in the workforce?”

“The numbers have all been low for the duration of the factory’s operation, never more than five each year. We’ve done—”

Before Zebolt could continue, a plume of smoke erupted in front of them on the catwalk. The trio stopped in a panic, wondering what caused it, but were soon put into greater fear as a cloaked figure appeared in the center of the haze. The sound of a sword being drawn from a sheath rang clear in the air, and soon the smoke dissipated to reveal a masked man holding a strange looking sword.

“What is this?” Zebolt demanded. “Who are you?”

“My concern doesn’t lie with you, gearhead.” The cloaked man informed. “I’ve here to speak with Setzer Gestahl.”

The silver haired Gestahl stepped forward from behind his nephew. “I am he. What do you want?”

The cloaked man lifted his weapon. “I have been given a mission to end your life!”

With a quick motion, the attacker leapt towards Setzer, who reached for something within his ground length coat. With a flash, Setzer pulled a small short from his coat and blocked the strike. The assassin retried his attack, but again Setzer blocked the strike with a determined grunt.

“I’m not such easy prey!” Setzer cried, pushing his attacker back.

“And I’m not so easy to defeat!”

The assassin pulled his sword back and gave a mighty swing, knocking Setzer over. Gordan tried to intervene, but the assassin already lashed down with his blade and cut across Setzer’s coat. However, to everyone’s surprise, the cloth didn’t cut, and the

sword merely slid across the material with no ill effect. Gordan finally lashed out against the assassin with his fists, delivering two strong punches across the man's jaw and shoulder. Taking hold of the assassin's arms, the two wrestled for supremacy as Setzer regained his footing and hefted his weapon. With a thrust of the short sword, Setzer's aim brought a severe laceration across the assassin's shoulder that drew a yelp of pain from his lips. Using the pain as a focus, the assassin wrenched his arms free of Gordan's grip and flung him aside, retreating from the reach of Setzer's sword.

“Who the hell are you!?” Setzer again asked.
“What do you have against me!?”

“Do you really expect me to tell you that?” The assassin joked. “I’ll give you this fight, but you will be dead before the week’s end!”

Reaching into his cloak, the assassin grabbed a ball and threw it to the ground, resulting in an explosion of smoke that engulfed his form. Gordan and Setzer held back as the smoke billowed out, eventually thinning to reveal that the assassin was gone. Setzer gave a grunt of satisfaction and put his sword back into the hidden sheath in his coat,

Gordan and Zebolt relaxing greatly as the rush faded.

“Uncle, are you injured?”

“No, I’m fine, luckily.” He sighed.

“But I saw... I saw that man stab at you! Did he miss?” Zebolt stuttered.

“No, I was saved by my coat.” Setzer replied, rubbing the black material. “It was specially made with tiny mythril threads that make it very durable for just such cases.”

“But why did you have that made?” Gordan asked. “Do you expect to be in such danger this often?”

Setzer hesitated a moment. “There are reasons... but I’d prefer not to speak about them where unneeded ears may overhear me.”

Zebolt recovered his senses and quickly interrupted the two. “Goodness me, what a disaster! I’m so sorry! I never thought that—”

“It’s okay, Zebolt.” Setzer waved off. “You couldn’t have stopped someone like that even if you tried. Assassins tend to be quite adept at sneaking into places without being noticed.”

“Still, we must get you to a medic to check you over, I shall have it no other way!” Zebolt cried, pulling on Setzer’s arm.

“If you insist!” Setzer said jerkily as he was pulled away. “Gordan! I’m sorry to have been interrupted like this! Please go home and we can reconvene for an late evening meal before work consumes my schedule.”

“I will!”

“So, do you wish to explain what that was about?” Gordan asked of his uncle.

Setzer adjusted his collar, sipping lightly from his goblet of wine before speaking. “What I’m going to say stays in this room, m’boy, and nowhere else.”

“As you wish.”

“A few months ago, when your great uncle was busy running the business, there were a number of potential buyers looking to purchase our livelihood or to install themselves as aids or assistants. Naturally, Edvard being a stubborn old man, he refused all their offers, even those who weren’t out to try and become rich off his work. Naturally still, this made more than one person upset at him, and it

wouldn't surprise me if they had connections to those less than savory types like that assassin."

"But why would they be coming after you?"

"Well, since I am next in line to assume control of the business, it would lead me to assume that someone got upset enough at Edvard to try and ruin the business by killing its leaders."

"Would it not be to their advantage to try and offer their assistance to you as they did with Edvard?"

"It would, so I don't know why someone is out to kill me."

"Strange indeed..." Gordan nodded.

The two remained silent in thought for a short minute. Gordan pondered over the dangerous risks that his uncle was under, seeing that the assassin had not only got inside the factory, but was able to escape as easily without detection. Setzer mulled over his position, staring into the wine to see his own watery reflection under the same kind of stress.

"So what are you planning to do about this?" Gordan asked, breaking the silence.

“I’m not sure. Normally I would have my personal escort with me for this, but I left them in Reno because I assumed that they wouldn’t follow me here. Except they knew... somehow they knew I would come here and they planted an assassin to kill me when I was most vulnerable. This is damnable news to come upon.”

“Surely you are able to defend yourself well enough.”

Setzer stifled a laugh. “You must be kidding. I’m a man in his forties, old by any standard. I was barely able to keep that assassin from killing me, and it took both our strength to fend him off. I’m going to need more than an armored coat and cheap sword to stay alive.”

Gordan had an idea. “You did mention that you would only be here for a few days, right? Would you object if I were to stay at your side to offer my service as a protector?”

Setzer gave his nephew a strange look. “You would do that for me?”

“I was caught off guard this time. With my sword and fighting clothes, I would be able to defeat your assassin with no trouble!”

“What of your... Regulators, was it? Don’t you have an obligation to them before this?”

“Gerick is an understanding man, if not a stubborn one as well. He would understand that protecting my family is of more importance than fighting off monsters in the plains.”

Setzer thought of the proposal for a few seconds, then gave a grin and nod. “If he is willing, then I shall be willing as well.”

* * *

“Goddess... this was a rough day...” Fedrich muttered.

“Who’d have thought that missing Gordan was gonna be this much trouble.” Illis added. “I guess that fool did more work than I thought.”

“Well, these thing’s are ’ta be expected. It’s not like it was any easier when Fedrich ’n Ruthy were gone.” Gerick added.

“True.” Illis agreed.

Fedrich stretched his arms idly. “So what else have we got to do today?”

Before Gerick could speak, there was a loud knock on the doors of the Hall. Curious, the bearded man stood up, walked to the doors, and shoved them open. Arching an eyebrow, he gave the person at the door a strange mixture of words that sounded like a question.

“Who is it?” Fedrich asked.

“You’ve got eyes, look fer yourself.” He replied.

Fedrich did, so turning to look at the person. His eyes widened in surprise as well, staring out at a rather liberally dressed female Burman who was leaning on a lance with an arrogant expression on her face.

“I’ve heard that you guys are looking for new warriors, right?” The woman half asked, half stated. “Cause I’m ready to save you the trouble of looking!”

* ^ * ^ *

The Author Speaks!

Dodges thrown bottles and bricks I’m sorry, already, sorry!! I didn’t mean for this chapter to take so damn long, but this was a hard segment of the story to deal with. I had three or four different ideas

on how to continue this, and I was in a bind for a while as to which one was best. Mix in a week of vacationing up north with relatives plus the start of college again, it was hard times for my writing. Hopefully the one I chose won't disappoint you all.

Aside from that, the new year is upon us, and I plan to keep my resolutions this time around. For this story, I hope that I will be able to continue it with the same effort that I did when I started. Remember, I'm not perfect by any means, so click that review button or shoot out an email if you feel like I can improve this story in any way. The more help I get from readers like you, the better I can do to make sure I deliver only the best in return. Lastly, I updated the Information Database, so check my bio page for the link and read away!

Peace and a glorious new years for you all!

Chapter Five

This story belongs to me and my creative mind. However, most of the characters, names, and places all belong to their respective companies, so don't yell at me for copyright infringements! *Remember, Italics represent a person's thoughts or the telling of past events.*

Enjoy...

:Faraway Dreams:

Chapter Five:

“I’ve heard that you guys are looking for new warriors, right?” The woman half asked, half stated. “Cause I’m ready to save you the trouble of looking!”

Everyone stared at the stranger woman at the door, curiosity prodding them on. The female Burman stood proudly, tapping her leather wrapped feet idly on the doorframe as she fingered a lock of her sandy blonde hair. Dressed in a loincloth, yellow

shirt, and mythril shoulder pads, her exotic appearance didn't mark her as being from Burmecia like the Regulators suspected.

Gerick was quick to question the woman's word.
“Did 'ya really?”

“Yep! I figure that with my skills, you people would do a lot better fightin' off those pesky monsters on the plains.”

“That's mighty good in word, but do 'ya think that you can back it up with a few trials?” The bearded man asked.

“Bring it on, I'll take any test you want!” The Burman woman declared, slamming the end of her lance on the ground.

Gerick looked back to the others present. “I know it's late, guys, but are you up fer giving the lady here a chance at joining us? It has been a while since we got a new member, and it'd be good to have more backup out in 'ta fields.”

Illis shrugged. “If her skills match her big mouth, why not.”

“I've got nothing against it.” Fedrich added.

“Sure.” Ruthy also agreed with a nod.

Gerick grunted in satisfaction, turning back to the woman. “Alright, looks like we’d be willin’ to give you a test. What’s your name?”

“Clariza Severspear of the Red Lance, but Claire does just as good.”

Gerick gave the woman a handshake. “A pleasure, Claire. My name is Gerick MacDougal, and these are my friends. The one in black is Illis, the redhead is Ruthy, and your fellow Burman is Fedrich. Step on out to the square, I’ll be givin’ you a test of yer battle skill.”

“Alrighty then, I’m up for it!”

The bearded man stepped inside and picked up his battle hammer from the table it rested on, then left the Hall and proceeded to the center of the square it stood on. Fedrich and the others walked to the doors and stood at the edge, keeping a safe distance to observe the fight. Claire stretched her arms out, flipping her lance around idly as she waited on Gerick’s word.

“The trial of a Regulator is one of utter severity.” Gerick began, spinning his battle hammer slowly. “The battlefield knows no mercy, nor does it recognize right from wrong or good from evil. As

such, a Regulator must be ready to lose his life in this terrible place, for the battlefield won't stop an enemy from takin' it. Hesitation to kill is as good as bein' killed, and no morals or rules of combat will stop it. Do you, Claire Severspear, pledge to fight this trial with all your soul and heart, and fight every battle after with the same?"

"As a Severspear, I do swear it." Claire agreed.

"As this is a trial between comrades, and is not a matter of life and death, it is agreed that the trial will stop when first blood is drawn. Now, let us draw our weapons, and let this trial commence!" Gerick commanded.

Gerick charged forward and lashed out with his weapon, the heavy metal hammer aiming for Claire's shoulder. With a laugh and a grin, she ducked down and to the side, avoiding the strike entirely. Her lance flew upward, the short edge whistling past Gerick's short cropped hair as he too dodged the attack. She then jumped into the air and performed several flips, landing on her nimble feet with her weapon at the ready.

"I'm not gonna stand still for a slow weapon like yours!" She stated, grinning. "Speed in where it's at!"

Running forward, she threw the length of her lance out in an effort to strike Gerick's side, but the elder man planted his hammer down and absorbed the strike with ease. Gripping the hammer with both hands, he jumped forward and thrust the heavy tip into Claire's chest, forcing a grunt of pain from her. Stepping back in time to avoid her hasty counter strike, Gerick chuckled his tongue in jest.

"Slow 'n steady, missy." He chided. "You gotta think your attacks through!"

Growling, she pulled back and again attacked, weapons colliding with a vicious speed. For a short minute, the two spent the battle attacking at a standstill, one unable to go past the other's defense. Snarling, Claire jumped back again and held her lance in both hands, staring down Gerick.

"You're tougher than you look." She spat.

"Come now, if 'ya can't beat me, then how do you expect 'ta defeat those monsters?" Gerick pushed.

Claire smiled and stood straight. "Okay then, I'll stop toying around and get serious."

She then knelt down and focused herself for a moment, then used her legs to jump across the

ground faster than Gerick could react. His face exploded in pain as her lance collided with it, the flat of the blade leaving a red mark across his cheek. Skidding to a halt, she again swung her lance out and marked Gerick's head with a second red welt across his face, knocking the elder man to his side. Standing tall, she pointed her lance down and quickly drew a small cut across his forehead, a slim line of red blood forming.

"I've drawn your blood, making victory mine." Claire stated with a haughty tone.

"That you did." Gerick agreed, wiping his fingers across the cut. "That was some mighty footwork, there, missy."

"Heh, it's my favorite technique."

"Where did you learn that?" Fedrich asked. "I've never seen an attack like that."

"I spent a lot of my youth working hard to be a warrior, going from place to place and learning various tricks from the people I met. My skills with this lance are improving with every place I go to." She chuckled lightly. "Now I'm going to be finally able to see how I really stand up against the brutes out there."

“What do you do anyway? Are you some kind of mercenary or just a wandering warrior?” Fedrich wondered.

“A little of both, whatever makes me more money in the end. I’ve been wandering from place to place to earn my keep for more than ten years now. I came here to see what’s around, and I heard about the Regulators through some of the fightin’ circles, so I figured that working a steady job for a while might liven things up for me.”

Fedrich nodded. “I joined up to get stronger for the Festival of the Hunt, so my live get’s more interesting each day. You look like you’d be ready to win the Master Hunter title if it started today!”

Gerick rubbed his pained face as he spoke. “Well, she’s got the strength ’ta handle the job, that’s fer sure.”

“Is there anything else I need to do? Any more tests?” Claire asked.

“Well, what do you all think?” Gerick asked of his comrades. “You think she’s got the stuff for it?”

“I guess I’ve been humbled.” Illis muttered.

“What did you say, sister?” Ruthy asked, poking her sister’s side.

“You heard me!” She retorted, stifling a laugh. “She’s as good as her word, why not let her in.”

“I agree, then.” Ruthy nodded.

“Count me in as well.” Fedrich smiled.

Gerick grinned. “Well then, seems like yer more than accepted. Welcome to the Regulators, Claire.”

“It’s nice to meet you all.” She nodded. “I’ll do my best to rid these plains of any monster I find!”

“Speakin’ of which, we’ll be goin’ out on patrol tomorrow mornin’ at sunrise from here. Do ‘ya have a place to stay at ‘till then?”

“I got a room, so no worries about that.”

“Care to step inside for a drink in the meanwhile?” Fedrich asked. “I think Gerick’s still got come coffee leftover.”

“No thanks. Don’t think me rude, but I’ve got to take care of some business before I turn in for the night, it’s later than I thought! I promise to be here at sunrise, so until then, comrades!”

With a final wave of her hand, Claire bounded off to the edge of the square and down the staircase, disappearing from view. Gerick muttered to himself, scratching his beard idly as he reflected on the brief yet intense meeting with the female Burman. Illis promptly forgot about the woman's arrival and walked into the Hall, quietly shuffling through a pile of old periodicals to read as the others re-entered the Hall.

"A strange woman, eh?" Gerick finally commented, entering the building as he closed the doors behind him.

"More like arrogant and loud mouthed in my ever so humble opinion." Illis replied dryly.

Ruthy snickered, then looked back toward Fedrich as he sat down, eyes neutral in thought. "Fedrich?"

The Burman made no response.

"Hello, Fedrich! Are we in there?" She asked louder.

"Huh?" He muttered, eyes focusing back to reality.

"You zoned out there for a sec. You okay?"

“I’m... fine, sorry.” He apologized.

“Thinking too much?” Ruthy asked.

Fedrich shook his head. “Not really, I’m just surprised to see a fellow Burman here, especially a woman like her.”

“Yeah, she’s really something.”

“She’s definitely not from Burmecia, not the way she dresses. I wonder if she’s from Cleyra, or maybe one of the western settlements in the desert?”

“I wouldn’t know.”

Fedrich caught himself before he spoke again. “Sorry, I’m just thinking too loudly.”

“Then you *are* thinking too much.” Ruthy accused with a light smirk.

The Burman smiled back. “I guess I am, take me away.”

A knock at the door again sounded before Ruthy could speak, drawing strange looks from the Regulators. Gerick stood up and walked to the door, opening it to see no one outside. The bearded man looked around the square, seeing no one nearby or any kids that might have played a prank on him.

“Down here,” A small, squeakish voice directed.
“Kupo.”

Gerick looked down, and he almost lost his balance when he saw a moogle standing quiet plainly at the base of his doorstep. Although moogles were relatively common sights throughout the Mist Continent, the fact that this particular moogle had a bow tie around his neck and a scroll in his hand was surprising enough to the elder man.

“Erm... can I help you?” Gerick asked.

“Actually, I have a letter for you!”

“Really, now. From who?”

“From Sir Setzer Gestahl’s residence, written by Sir Gordan Fulmen, kupo.”

“From ’ol Gordan, eh? What’s he got to say?”

The moogle unwrapped the scroll, holding it with tiny hands as it nearly extended down to the ground. “Dear Gerick, I write to you with grave news. You know of my vacation to be with my parents and my uncle Setzer, no doubt, but it would seem that my stay here will be a for a time longer. During the tour of the Zebolt Factory, an assassin came and

attempted to kill my uncle, but we were able to hold him off and stop the attack.”

“Much to my surprise, my uncle unveiled to me a strange set of events that possibly has lead to him becoming a target for one of his rivals to the family business. By my word, I cannot reveal any other details of his problems, but I can tell you that he is in danger unlike anything he can protect himself from. As such, I will be staying at his side as a personal bodyguard until he returns to Treno and his loyal protectors at his home. He will be leaving within four days, so I shall stay at his side until then. The moogle with this message, Kurin, will also act as my liaison to you during my stay, so please entrust him with my sword that I left at the Hall.”

“My apologies for this unexpected turn of events, but you must understand that my family’s safety comes before my duties as a Regulator. I shall write to you as soon as I am able to, hopefully with more information as to what I am involved in. Until we meet again, my friend. Cordially, Gordan.”

Gerick whistled low. “Seems like the poor guy’s not gettin’ any rest now.”

“Pardon my haste, but Sir Gordan requested his weapon sent over as soon as possible, kupo.”

“In a hurry, eh? I’ll be a sec.” Gerick waved, walking back into the Hall. “Illis! Did ya see where Gordan left his sword?”

“By the coffeepot where you’d see it, obviously.” She replied with an overly sarcastic tone.

“Right.” He muttered, going to his precious coffee grinding arrangement to pick up the sheathed weapon. Proceeding back to the door, he set the weapon next to the moogle and had to stifle a laugh when he compared the two. The moogle looked at the blade, pink pom-pom shaking about as if agitated, then gripped the thing with his small hands. Once Gerick let go, the sword fell over with the moogle as well, drawing a high pitched squeal from the creature as it hit the ground.

“You gonna be able ’ta carry it, Kurin?” The bearded man asked.

“I’ll manage, kupo.” The moogle insisted, hefting the weapon by its strap and flapping its wings at a frenzied pace. After a few seconds, it managed to gain some height and began fluttering back into the square, squeakish curses following. Gerick shook his head and chuckled, then closed the doors again and sat down heavily on a nearby chair.

“So what’re we going to do now?” Fedrich asked.

“Well, you heard what Gordan had to say, so I’m not gonna try ’n stop him.” Gerick replied.

“Yes, but what are *we* going to do? You aren’t just going to let him be in that kind of situation without us, are you?” Illis pressed.

“He chose to do what he did, an’ I’m not going to change around my schedule to help. He’s more than able to fight on his own, you know that.”

Illis glared at the elder man. “Come on, Gerick, you can’t mean that! Gordan could be in a lot of trouble, getting involved in stuff like this. Assassins after high ranking nobles and businessmen, this is the kind of thing that gets people killed for being even around to the target!”

“Illis, I’m the head leader ’o the Regulators, and it’s my job to do the patrols around the city to defend it from monsters. I can’t just forget about that ’ta go defend one man when I’ve got the whole city ’ta think of!”

“But Gordan’s our friend!” Ruthy added. “You can’t ignore the danger he’s in!”

Gerick sighed, rubbing his beard. “Ruthy, you know that he’s my greatest friend in the world, but I’ve got ‘ta put things in perspective. I’m the leader of the Regulators first, a friend second, and he knows that it’s my responsibility ‘ta protect the people before him. I can’t put one man’s life over everyone else’s, it goes against everythin’ that the Regulator’s stand for, even if it’s for Gordan.”

“That’s cold, Gerick... not like you at all.” Illis commented with a quiet voice.

“I’m sorry ‘ta hear that, but such is life, eh?” He shrugged.

“No, life’s a lot simpler than that.” Illis replied tersely. “I’m going to help him, I put my friend’s lives above strangers.”

Gerick remained silent.

“Let me take a break, I’ve worked as hard as anyone else to earn one.”

“Illis, I’m not—”

“Don’t be like this...” She interrupted.

“No, don’t you be like this!” He snapped, foreign anger in his voice. “You swore to me that you’d protect the people ‘o this city with your own life!

Are you gonna go back on it now, forget everythin' that we do 'ta help the innocent live without fear?"

Illis stood up sharply, nearly knocking her chair over. She glared down at Gerick, her face tight with emotional conflicts raging beneath. Fedrich and Ruthy looked on at the confrontation, both of them surprised at the changes in their attitudes when push came to shove. After a few seconds passed, Illis left the table and walked to the door, picking up her weapon as she passed by the rack that held them. Gerick stood up as she pushed the doors open, hoping to stop her.

"Illis!" He barked, getting her attention.

"If you're going to fire me..." She started, eyes beginning to water. "Then do it. I'll protect those who I love instead."

Before Gerick could reply, she left the Hall and stalked into the darkening square, hurried pace taking her towards the stairs and out of his sight. The elder man stood still for a long second, then sighed heavily and closed the doors in defeat. Sitting back down on his chair, he glanced over at his two remaining comrades with a tired face.

"Why?" Ruthy asked.

“It was her choice ’ta go.” He replied.

“You should have just let her go.” Fedrich offered
“You know how she is about protecting her friends.”

“You already know what I’m gonna say, Fedrich,
didn’t you understand?”

“You’re the one who doesn’t understand!” Ruthy
cried out, standing from her chair and storming out
of the Hall.

“Ruthy, please!” He pleaded, unable to stop her
from leaving as well.

Fedrich stood up as well to follow the redhead,
drawing a look from Gerick. The Burman stared
back at him, eyes reflecting inner feelings that made
him seem ages older than he was.

“‘And you value your damned duty more than my
happiness!?’ Illis said that when Elric tried to stop
her from living here and doing what she wants.” He
reiterated from memory, walking towards the door.
“You reminded me of that time just now, Gerick.”

Fedrich left the Hall, leaving Gerick alone with
the thoughts of his friends words in his ear. Standing
silently, he walked to the doors and closed them

again, latch clicking in place as he pondered the unraveling of his camaraderie with the others.

* * *

Kurin swore again in his native tongue, which sounded more like angry hisses than any epitaph humans used. The sword that he held was heavy, seemingly getting heavier with each second passing by. Eventually the sword began to drag on the ground, and the moogle finally gave up and opted to take a breather, pulling the weight to the side of the street to not be a nuisance to those out.

“Stupid sword...” He muttered. “Why’d they make these things so heavy to start with?”

After a minute, he again gripped the leather scabbard and began pulling, small wings getting sore from the exertion. A gloved hand suddenly gripped the sword and pulled it up, Kurin squeaking with surprise as he was lifted up to a familiar face.

“Hey!? You’re one of Gordan’s friends, yes?” He chirped, wiggling his feet.

“Yeah, you need help with this?” Illis asked.

“I guess so... stupid sword.” The moogle complained, letting go to hover near Illis’ body.

“You’re going back to where Gordan’s at?” She again asked.

“Of course I am.” Kurin replied.

“I’ll go with you.”

“I don’t think that Sir Gordan’s parents will let you in.” The moogle warned, hovering near her face.

Illis frowned. “They’ll let me in, moogle, don’t doubt that for a moment.”

Kurin nodded, then noticed that Illis’ cheeks were slick with wetness. “Tears? Are you crying because of something?”

Illis pulled on the sword, drawing part of the blade free. “Mind your own business.”

“Eep! Sorry!” He replied quickly.

“Lead on.” Illis ordered.

Kurin whistled low, wondering what kind of people that his master’s nephew really worked around if one woman was this much trouble to deal with.

Chapter Six

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Enjoy...

:Faraway Dreams:

Chapter Six:

“Master Setzer, I have returned with Gordan’s sword.” Kurin announced as he entered the front room.

“Coming!” The silver haired Gestahl replied.

Setzer entered the front room from one of the adjacent hallways, again drinking from an ever-present goblet of wine. He stopped his walk when he saw another guest at his door, someone he wasn’t expecting. In the midst of expensive artistry and

furniture, the woman's plain clothing made her stand out even more than his mongle assistant.

"Kurin, who is this that is with you?" He asked of the mongle.

"This is—"

"I can talk, you don't need to have your mongle speak for me." Illis informed.

Setzer arched an eyebrow at her brazen attitude. "Then do explain yourself, milady."

"My name is Illis Killjoy, and I'm here to see Gordan. Kurin was more than willing to lead me here."

"And what is your relation to my nephew?"

"I'm his friend and ally in the Regulators."

"Ah yes, I seem to recall him mentioning your people. Kurin, go bring Gordan here for our guest."

"Yes Sir." The mongle nodded, fluttering off to another hall.

"So tell me, milady, what brings you here at such a late hour?"

“I’m here because I want to be at Gordan’s side for his stay here protecting you.” Illis stated matter of factly. “At least, that’s what I understand him to be doing from the letter he sent.”

Setzer frowned slightly. “Did he mention anything else in regards to that?”

“Only that it was some rivalry from another company that’s got you on their list.”

“Good.” He nodded with a sip of his drink.

A shuffle of footsteps announced Gordan’s arrival, the nobleman entering the main room with a hurried pace. Spying Illis, he quickly walked to her side with a concerned expression. Setzer stepped aside quietly, giving the two some privacy as he thought over the details of the day.

“Illis, why have you come here?” Gordan asked.

“Because I want to be with you while you’re here to make sure you don’t get hurt protecting your uncle.”

“I appreciate your concern, but you do not need to—”

“Please, Gordan, I want to do this!” She pleaded. “Assassins are supposed to be frighteningly good at

their trade, not stopping for anything or anyone. You could be killed fighting for him!"

"I will not be hurt, Illis, I can defend myself sufficiently from the man who attacked us."

"But still...!"

He put a finger against her lips. "Please, do not argue with me, Illis."

She batted his hand away, looking hurt. Gordan chuckled lightly as a memory crossed his mind.

"This has been a strange day, assassination attempts aside. Normally is it not I who is begging to protect you from harm rather than you of me?"

Illis stifled a laugh. "Yeah. How odd."

Gordan smiled at her, but noticed that her eyes were tinged with redness.

"Have you been crying, Illis?" He asked, concerned.

Her expression quickly changed, and she remained silent as she stared at some point away from Gordan in thought.

"Were you afraid for me?" He again posed.

Sniffling, she looked back to the nobleman. “When I heard about the attack in the letter, I wanted to go and help you. Gerick said that you could protect yourself, and he was acting like he didn’t care about the danger at all, so I left to come here.”

“It sounds much more complex than that.” Gordan noted. “But it matters little, Illis, you have a duty to the Regulators first, and if Gerick will not allow you here, then you must respect his decision.”

“I don’t *care* about his decision!” She insisted, wrapping her arms around Gordan’s form as she rested her head against his chest. “I care about *you*, and I want to protect you instead of fighting in the field, even if it costs me my position!”

“Illis...” Gordan started, fumbling for words.

“If you don’t mind my interruption, you two,” Setzer coughed, reminding the two that he was still present. “But you really got your feelings in a knot. Both of you seem more focused on protecting the others to think of much else. Gordan, I know you’re a good warrior, and I’m certain that your friend Illis is just as good, so why are you squabbling over things like this?”

The two stepped apart from the embrace, looking at the elder man as he rested against the side of an oak table. Setzer's expression seemed to tell that he already knew the answers to their questions.

"It is only proper for me to defend those who need it." Gordan replied, Illis adding her own stare of irritation.

"And sometimes, m'boy, being proper can be more trouble than it's worth." He spoke with a worldly tone.

"You certainly seem like a paragon of wisdom." Illis muttered.

"I consider myself an expert in the subject of relations between a man and a woman." He chuckled with a knowing smirk.

"So then, o knowledgeable one, what advice would you spare us?"

Pausing a moment to gather his thoughts, Setzer sipped his wine. "Gordan, would you say that miss Illis can hold her own in a battle?"

"Yes, she can." He nodded.

"And would you say the same of Gordan, Miss Illis?"

“Yeah, and stop calling me miss.”

“As you wish.” He nodded. “So then, if each of you believe the other can defend themselves, and you each know that you are able to defend yourselves, why argue over that detail? Being courteous aside, nephew, it makes no sense.”

“So then what would you have us do?” Gordan asked.

The silver haired man shrugged his shoulders. “That’s up for you to think about, I’m not going to presume I know everything about you two. All I’m saying is that you don’t need to be so worried about one another when you know each of you can hold your own.”

Gordan thought over the words, but Illis spoke up before he could. “I guess that makes sense...”

“Now, enough of thinking for the evening.” Setzer insisted. “It’s far past sundown, so I’ll be turning in for the night. You’re more than willing to stay the night here, Illis, if you wish to talk more with Gordan. I’ll have the servants arrange a guest room for you opposite Gordan’s.”

“Thank you...” She nodded.

“Think nothing of it. Goodnight, all.” He spoke with a bow, walking down the hall to his bedroom.

* * *

“So Claire, ‘ya ready to get goin’?” Gerick asked of the Burman.

“I’ve been ready since I was born.” She declared, twirling her lance around eagerly.

“Okay, let’s strike on out!”

The Regulators stepped off the worn dirt path outside of Lindblum, heading out for their daily patrol around the city walls. The early morning sunlight was barely over the nearby mountains, warming up the chilly nighttime air as the animals of the plains also woke. As she promised, Claire was pacing around the square even before anyone else arrived at the hall, probably before anyone else was even awake. Despite her early arrival, she was walking with an energetic pace, tossing her lance from hand to hand as she looked across the grasslands for potential enemies.

“You seem ready for action.” Gerick commented.

“You bet! I’ve been idle for nearly a week lookin’ for a job, and I’m damn near ready to start fighting

you people to pass the time!” She laughed.

“That’s good, good! It’s nice ’ta see someone as energetic as you with us!” Gerick laughed as well.

Fedrich was about to comment on her attitude, but he noticed that Ruthy wasn’t paying any attention to the conversation, walking quietly with a somber expression. The Burman stepped to her side, getting her attention.

“You okay?” He asked.

“Illis never came home last night.” She informed.
“I’m worried about her.”

Fedrich patted her shoulder in reassurance. “She probably went to see Gordan at his parent’s home is all. She wouldn’t have left for anywhere else.”

“Still, she left in such a hurry...” Ruthy continued, looking towards Fedrich. “You don’t think that she’s never going to come back to the Regulators, do you?”

“I’m sure she’ll come back, she probably just needs to sort out her feelings.”

The redhead nodded. “Probably. I know I’m still confused about it. I’ve never seen Gerick so

adamant about the Regulators before, it was scary to see him like that.”

“He’s dedicated to his job. He was a member of the Lindblum Guards for a long time, so he probably still holds things like loyalty and service up higher than anything else.” He added with a smirk. “Besides, we all know that he enjoys this work more than any of us, so he’s bound to be cranky over it once in a while.”

Ruthy smiled, hugging Fedrich’s shoulder. “Thanks for the reassurance, Fedrich.”

“No problem.” He grinned, returning the motion.

“Hey!!” Gerick shouted, getting everyone’s attention. “Target’s ahead!”

They all looked straight to where Gerick’s hammer pointed, eyes seeing the tiny forms of a pair of Iron Beaks and several spiders in a hurried run across the plains. Unsheathing their weapons, everyone gathered together as they make their plans to attack.

“Okay, we’ll—”

“Alright! Let’s go kick some ass!” Claire bellowed, taking off for the monsters with lightning

speed.

“Claire, hold up a sec!” Gerick called.

“Damn, I’ll get her!” Fedrich spoke, dashing after the woman.

Pushing his legs as hard as he could, leaping often to gain ground, Fedrich’s barely caught up to Claire’s thin form when they were halfway towards the pack of monsters. Gasping for breath, he looked in surprise to see Claire still bearing a smile and a steady breath.

“S’about time you got here, Fedrich!” Claire chided.

“How can you run this fast!?” He asked between gasps.

She laughed, readying her lance. “On the plains, where you run with the Fangs and Mus, you learn to run faster and harder than the winds of the Vube!”

“Come back, we can’t take them on alone!” Fedrich insisted.

“I’m gonna go all out, comrade, so watch and learn!” She declared, taking to the skies with a mighty jump into the wind.

“Claire, wait!” He shouted to no avail, watching her reach the apex of her leap.

She spun her lance around furiously, then with the speed of falling stars, she flung her weapon down at one of the monsters. With deadly accuracy and strength, the metal bladed rod shattered through the beak of an Iron Beak, scattering hard bone across the grass as the monster wailed in agony and death. Landing easily by her lance, she pulled it from the soft earth and looked to her next opponent, the second Iron Beak that screeched in anger at the passing of its mate. The Burman laughed madly as she lifted her lance to the charging monster. With a yell of effort, Claire whipped the lance down and completely halted the Iron Beak’s motion in a single strike, shattering a long section of the beak apart. Jumping onto its back, she used the same strength to crack the monster’s skull into pieces and send it into death.

“Ha ha!” Claire laughed. “I finally feel alive again!”

Gazing across the field, she looked at the few spiders that stood in hesitation, primal emotions making them reconsider their prey’s strength. With a malicious smile, she leapt into the sky and again cast

her lance into their ranks, the weapon beheading a beast and ending its life. Landing and gripping the pole, Claire literally took to her feet in a dance of battle prowess, spinning the lance around to deflect the spider's mandibles as they surrounded her. With a sweep of her arm, she impaled a spider and killed it, then pulled the lance out and slashed through another limb that tried to knock her down.

“Come on, come on! You gotta give me more, give me everything you got!” She demanded of the monsters.

The spiders didn’t respond any differently to her words, merely continued attacking with their arms and snapping fangs. Fedrich, finally close enough to enter the fight, hesitated as he saw Claire’s expression slip into a maddening trance. He didn’t even break his gaze when the others finally arrived, mesmerized by her fluid yet savage attacks that brought death with every motion of her arm.

“Fedrich! The hell are you doin’ here!?” Gerick asked, stepping next to the Burman. “Where’s Claire?”

Fedrich only pointed, and everyone else stared at her as the last spider was dispatched with a screech from its dying mouth. Claire finally stopped her

spear, standing still in a battle stance as she gasped for breath, fur matted with sweat and exertion.

“Claire?” Fedrich asked.

The female Burman snapped to his direction with a snarl, a feral look in her eyes. Recognizing her ally, she shook her head and regained her senses, straightening up and slinging her lance across her shoulder. Wiping her scattered hair free from her face, she chuckled at the stunned expressions her comrades bore.

“Heh, I told ‘ya so.” She said of Fedrich.

“That’s... that’s amazing!” Fedrich sputtered.
“How did you do that?”

“I told you I’ve been doing this for ten years. I’m probably stronger than any monster around!” She boasted.

“I wouldn’t doubt it.” He nodded.

“Okay, ladies, let’s clean up this mess and get our prizes fer the day!” Gerick commanded, heading out for the corpses.

“I don’t think we’re done yet.” Ruthy argued.
“There’s something up in the sky!”

Everyone looked up to the early morning sky, eyes tracing across clouds to find whatever it was that Ruthy mentioned. Moments later, a shadowy figure appeared from underneath a cloud, large wings flapping idly and tail whipping around in flight.

“What is it?” She asked. “A dragon?”

“It’s too fast ’ta be a big one...” Gerick muttered. “An Ironite, maybe?”

“No, look at the wings, they’re too long.” Claire observed. “It’s gotta be some kind of lesser dragon.”

“But what kind could it be? I’ve never seen dragons up on the plains before.” Ruthy pondered.

The dragon began to circle around, its form getting larger as it descended to the earth below.

“I don’t really care what kind it is now, it looks ready to fight!” Fedrich warned, drawing his sword.

“Hold up!” Claire insisted, holding her hand to stay the others. “I’m still worked up, I gotta get rid of this excess energy I have! You stand back and let me take this bad boy on!”

Spinning her lance about eagerly, she stared at the unknown dragon as it flew ever closer to the

Regulators. Readyng her legs, she crouched down and prepared to leap and meet the monster head on. However, her body quaked and she fell to her knee, free hand clutching her shoulder as he gritted her teeth.

“Claire!” Fedrich shouted, running to her side.

“I’m fine.” She growled.

“What happened to you? Did you get hurt?” Fedrich asked, looking her over.

“One of those spiders bit me is all.” She muttered. “Why is it hurting this much?”

“Those spiders have poisonous fangs! You’ve got to hold back and get some help.” Fedrich cursed. “Ruthy! Claire got bit by those spiders, she needs some antidotes!”

“Okay!” The redhead nodded.

“Ruthy, you keep yerself and Claire safe! Fedrich, you’re with me!” Gerick ordered.

“Right!”

The two warriors ran ahead to meet the dragon, giving the two women some distance for safety. Gerick hefted his hammer, and Fedrich swung his

sword out as they watched the monster close. Suddenly the dragon dipped low to the ground, and before Gerick could dodge to the side, the monster's legs collided with his body and sent him flying back to the grass. It circled around and halted in front of Fedrich's form, revealing the entirety of it's body.

"What in Rei's blessed name is that!?" Fedrich cried out, eyes wide as he looked at the large, pinkish dragon hovering before him.

"It's a... Coral Dragon!" Gerick coughed, recognizing the beast. "They normally stay 'round the mountains! It tries to put its enemies 'ta sleep before eating them or using lightning to fry 'em!"

"Right!" Fedrich spoke, holding his sword protectively.

The Burman watched the dragon as it drifted across the ground, nose up and sniffing the air loudly as it tried to make sense of the creature it saw. Fedrich felt sweat bead across his face, absorbing into his fur to mat it to his skin. His previous battles made him experienced in fighting arachnids nearly twice his own size, but this dragon was twice as big as that.

Oh man, how am I gonna fight this thing? I've never fought a dragon!...

"What're you waiting for!" Gerick continued.
"Kill the damn thing!"

"But... how!? What should I do to stop it!?"

"Just rush it! Make sure it can't put ya to sleep!"

Fedrich remained still, even as the Dragon snorted and flapped its wings harder, gaining some altitude as it's tail swung quickly behind it. He clenched his jaw shut, trying to force his body to action in face of the demonic monster that dropped his leader in one strike.

Goddess Rei... if you're listening to me, please help me stop this beast from hurting my friends!

Casting his fate to the wind and his faith, Fedrich brought his sword up and leapt to the sky, aiming for the dragon and readying to lash out. With a wide swing, his blade caught the tip of a wing, the dragon unable to back away fast enough and bellowing it's frustrations out. Landing on his feet, Fedrich again jumped up with intent to carve the Dragon's hide apart. However, the pink beast reared its head back, electricity dancing across its maw as it prepared to belch a lightning spell at the approaching Burman.

Fedrich's eyes went wide at the thought, knowing he couldn't adjust his path and made for an easy target.

No! This can't be the end!!

As the dragon's head fell forward and the lightning spell exploded from its jaws, Fedrich felt a strange soothing wind encompass his body. The wind tickled his fur and ears, and suddenly the wind gained strength, his body lurching to the side as the bolt of lightning passed by, deadly energies inches from his form. After the wind and spell passed, Fedrich found himself reaching the end of his jump, the delicate form of the dragon's wing before him. Not taking a moment to hesitate, the Burman slashed up and down, the sharp sword cutting the wing open and drawing a terrible screech from the beast.

Both Burman and dragon fell to the earth as gravity assumed control, but the Regulator was first to attack the other. His sword raised up, Fedrich slashed across the Dragon's neck and doubled back, adding twice the injury to the beast. The Coral Dragon snapped at Fedrich with it's deadly fangs, but the agile warrior jumped out of it's reach. Fedrich held still, watching as the dragon stalked across the ground, slithering tongue coursing through its razor sharp teeth.

“How am I going to beat this thing?” He wondered, seeing that the dragon was only mildly hurt from his attack.

A battle cry suddenly broke through the air, and the dragon looked to the source of the call in time to see the silvery form of a battle hammer collide into it’s head. For a long moment, both Gerick and the dragon remained motionless as the impact of the strike took effect, the elder warrior hoping his sneak attack was good enough. Time continued as the dragon recovered from the blow, but it quaked and coughed out a screech as Fedrich’s short sword pierced it’s neck, cutting through vital nerves. Wrenching his sword out, the blade cut through the neck entirely and allowed the wound to bleed freely.

The Coral Dragon’s body shuddered in it’s death throes, then collapsed onto the ground with a dull thud, twitching slightly before death claimed it. Fedrich pulled himself upright, gasping for breath as the adrenaline rush faded away. He looked up towards Gerick, the elder man also breathing deeply as he took in what just happened.

“Did we-?” Fedrich started.

Gerick let out a laugh, nearly falling over. “We just took out a Coral Dragon!”

“...Unbelievable!” Fedrich gasped.

“’Ya did good, Fedrich!” Claire encouraged from afar. “I think your the one’s who’s ready to win the Master Hunter title!”

“Thanks!” He replied with a smile.

“So what can we do with this thing?” Ruthy asked. “We’ve never fought a dragon before.”

Gerick ginned widely. “Don’t you know anythin’ about dragons, Ruthy? People’ll literally pay thousands for their claws and fangs! Some ’o the best weapons ever made have been made of dragon bone.”

The redhead’s eyes widened. “Seriously!? Talk about luck!”

“Trust me, it was worth ’ta effort! I’m gonna probably be off my feet again ’cause of the damn beast.”

“Well let’s get to it, comrades!” Claire insisted, standing on uneasy feet as she walked to the dragon.

“Take it easy, Claire, you just got poisoned!” Ruthy reprimanded, holding the female Burman steady.

“Thanks for the reminder, but I’ve taken worse than this an’ lived. You ought to look over Gerick and make sure he isn’t going to keel over.”

“Okay.” Ruthy nodded, heading towards the elder warrior.

Claire slowly walked towards the corpse of the dragon, seeing that Fedrich was working diligently on it’s claws as Gerick assisted him, much to the dismay of Ruthy. The female Burman chuckled to herself, admiring the Regulators for being a flexible and close knitted group.

They’re stronger than I gave them credit for, and that’s something I can’t afford to do with anyone these days. Underestimating people is the first thing that leads to being defeated, and I won’t allow myself to be beaten...

Chapter Seven

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Enjoy...

:Faraway Dreams:

Chapter Seven:

“So what are your plans for the afternoon, uncle?” Gordan asked, leaning against a wall of the study.

“Sadly I’m going to be buried under all sorts of beaurocratic paperwork for the rest of my stay. Assuming control of a company is a hell of a lot more difficult than I figured it to be.” Setzer sighed.

“Sounds like plenty of fun.” Illis commented.

“Then would you care to join me in the festivities?” Setzer asked, eyebrow arched in curiosity.

“No thanks, I wouldn’t want to take any away from you.” She continued with a light smirk.

The silver haired man chuckled. “You’ve got yourself a humorous one, nephew!”

Gordan nodded. “Sarcasm is indeed her strongest suit short of her skill at swordplay.”

“If her sword is sharper than her tongue, I’ll be in good hands.”

“So, what are you going to do once you assume control of the business? Mother and father never did talk much of it, even though they reap a portion of the benefits of its success.” Gordan asked.

“Well, you already know that we deal in manufacturing parts for the Airship industry, so we aren’t exactly on the front page of the news circles.” Setzer explained, reviewing a thick stack of papers. “Despite all that, we still are a major part of the production chain, making the primary hulls and engines casings for all the standard Airship models

in service. Basically its our business and a few others that provide all the raw parts for Airship construction.”

“Sounds like a good place to be.” Illis commented from the chair she rested on.

“It would be, except I get to read all these papers and sign documents all day long. A proverbial paper soldier, if you would, instead of being at the front lines of construction or planning.”

“Oh.” She mouthed.

“So is that what you used to do? Plan and build models?” Gordan asked.

“Yep, I spent the past few years working on the designs and blueprints for the Gestahl business ship, my Diamond Blackjack. We just completed the final phase of construction and christened her a week before my father passed away, but I didn’t get a chance to fly her here.”

“Why not?”

“Paperwork, as if it’s any surprise. We got delayed registering her with the Lindblum Airspace Authority, and we can’t fly in Lindblum territory until we do.”

“Waste of time, I say. Why bother with it?” Illis muttered.

“Because the Regency is trying to make sure to keep a list of possible aerial threats to the city. During the latter half of the Mist Wars, one of the last surviving factions in the King Ed plains developed an Airship, a piss poor one, but it worked none the less. It actually managed to circumvent Regent Cid the 8ths Airship division and attacked Lindblum itself, doing some minor damage to the castle before it crashed and exploded. Since then, they’ve made it a top priority to keep track of all Airships that enter and leave the region, just in case.”

Illis arched an eyebrow. “You certainly know your history.”

“I studied history during my tenure at the Treno Regional Academy, specifically the history of warfare on the Mist Continent.” Setzer explained. “It was long before I ever became involved in the family business, but it still rattles around in my head.”

“Your uncle is quite the brain, Gordan.” She commented plainly.

“It is quite normal for nobles to have an extensive knowledge of such things. I, too, attended an academy for knowledge, but I specifically worked in the study of culture and local tradition.”

“So that explains why you’re always such a socialite around others.” She said with a surprised tone.

“It is not solely from that. Any man of noble stature should be social and willing to converse with others.”

“I guess that’s the one thing I won’t ever understand.”

“Being anti-social as you are, it’s no wonder you don’t get it.” Setzer stated.

Illis glared at the elder Gestahl. “Watch it.”

“Easy, Illis, he only means it lightheartedly.” Gordan insisted.

“Hot tempered as well.” Setzer grinned. “You’ve really got yourself a strange woman, Gordan. The two of you hardly seem to have any similarities at all.”

“Opposites attract one another, they say.” Gordan retorted.

“A true statement, m’boy, but it’s still an odd thing to see, I should know.”

“And how would you?” Illis pressed.

Setzer faltered a moment, his face blushing slightly. “Well, let us say that my youth was quite... lively for the women in Treno.”

“A lecher for an uncle, how nice.” Illis muttered.

“Illis!” Gordan warned.

“It’s alright, Gordan, you don’t need to get all offended. I know it was wrong of me, and I’ll gladly take any criticism on the subject.”

“But still-!”

“Just let it go, please.” The silver haired man insisted.

“...Okay then.” Gordan nodded.

“So what are you two gonna do? Why don’t you go out and have a good meal at the Blue Crow?”

“Not if it means leaving you here unwatched.” Gordan replied quickly.

“Ah, come now, I doubt that the assassin will try to get me here.”

“Like he would not attack you in a crowded and heavily secure Airship factory?”

Setzer arched an eyebrow in respect. “Touché.”

“Why don’t you come with us, then?” Illis asked. “I’m sure you could use a break from this exciting work.”

“I would, but like I’ve said, I’m stuck here. Paperwork doesn’t read and sign itself, at least not yet.”

The darkly dressed woman sighed loudly. “Gods, now I know why nobles are so stiff and boring. This would make anyone lose their mind.”

“Too true, I say.” Setzer agreed, helping himself to another pile of papers to review. “I’m going to be here for a long time, so you two can at least go to the kitchen and prepare yourself something before I break for dinner if you’re hungry.”

“Sounds like an idea.” Illis nodded.

“Kurin will lead you there.” Setzer spoke, motioning to the moogle that was resting on a pile of old books. “Kurin!! Wake up!”

The moogle’s pom-pom twitched in annoyance, but the furry creature got up anyway and shook itself

awake. Hopping to the air with a whistle, it drifted over to Setzer's side and bowed lightly.

"You bellowed, Sir Setzer?" It asked.

"Could you lead Illis here to the kitchen and help her prepare an afternoon snack for her and Gordan?" The elder Gestahl asked.

"Of course." It nodded, facing Illis. "Follow me."

Both the moogle and the darkly dressed woman left the upper level study, leaving uncle and nephew alone for the time being. Gordan stepped forward and stretched his arms idly, pacing towards the large worktable Setzer sat at.

"Do you have a spare quill and parchment? I feel like sending a letter to Gerick and Ruthy so they do not worry about Illis."

"There's plenty right here, so feel free." Setzer answered with a wave of his arm.

Gordan searched about the surface and picked up a spare feather quill and a ink well, then pulled out a large roll of parchment and used a small blade to cut a segment of it free. Pulling up a free stool to the other end of the table, he dipped the quill into the ink and began writing down his message.

“Dear Gerick and Ruthy.” He began, thinking out each word in his head. “I will make this message brief, as not much has occurred here at the manor. Firstly, Ruthy, I want you to know that Illis is safe and unharmed, and that she came directly to the manor as soon as she left, following along with Kurin. She has insisted most strongly to be at my side while I protect my uncle Setzer, so she will be here for as long as I shall be. Although I understand that she came here under less than willing terms, I will not assume her reasons for coming here or why she did. All I know is that her intent to protect me and my uncle is as true and loyal as her desire to protect others from harm by monsters in the field, so please do not fault her harshly, Gerick.”

“Uncle Setzer has divulged little more information about his assassin or the reasons why he is under threat of death. Though I am loath to pressure him to explain, we may be forced to if the killer attempts another attack. I... suspect, that due to his promiscuous nature in his youth, he might have gained an enemy from jilted lovers who want a share of his newly gained power. A theory at best, but one that ought not to be left out.”

“I offer my apologies on behalf of Illis, but again I do not seek to fault her for her intentions.”

“Until another time, my friends. Sincerely,
Gordan.”

“So who’s the new missie?” Corban asked.

“The name’s Claire!” The female Burman declared. “Newest and most exhausted member of the Regulators.”

“Energetic lass you got, Gerick!”

“Ain’t she, though. She’s got the energy all of us together tenfold!” The elder man laughed.

“So what didja get fer me today?”

“Plenty!” Gerick grinned, hefting the large leather sack off his shoulder and onto the table. “We got ourselves a haul like nothin’ else!”

The tattooed man pulled the drawstrings open and unfurled the pack, letting the collection of dragon’s claws and teeth fall onto the surface. The man gasped, picking up one of the fangs and looking at them in amazement. He then laughed deeply, eyes

drifting across the large pile of such things in front of him.

“Gods above, this is amazin’ stuff? All of it’s dragon bone?”

“Yep! Me ‘n Fedrich here managed to bag a Coral Dragon that was chasin’ some spiders across the plains. He was a tough bastard, but we got ‘em after a helluva fight!”

“Well congrats on yer first big catch, kiddo!” Corban smiled.

“Thanks.” Fedrich replied modestly.

“So can ‘ya take any of them for face value?” Gerick asked of his old friend.

“Jest one or two, ‘cause you’ve been a mighty good customer. The rest’ll have ‘ta go to the specialists in ‘ta Forger’s Circle.”

“We’ll take ‘em ‘ta Torres’ place. He’ll buy them for good money.”

“If’n you can find the guy, he’s a busy man!”

“I’m sure he’ll be plenty willing to see us for these fangs and teeth!” Claire contested.

“Maybe so, missie, but you don’t know Torres! He’s the premier synthesis blacksmith in the entire city, and hundreds ‘o people go to him ’ta make the best weapons ’n armor possible! Rumor has it that he might even be considerin’ to retire so he can take a break from the business!”

Claire cocked her head to the side in curiosity. “Popular guy, it seems.”

“That aside, ‘ya got anythin’ else to sell?” Corban asked.

“Just some spider fangs ’n a good weight of beak.”

“Okay, let’s get that taken care of.”

Corban took the claws and teeth from the dragon and bound them back up, sliding the pouch to the other end of his beaten down table to make room. Gerick put the rest of the items gained onto the table, and the tattooed man made quick work of counting them out and weighing the beak.

“Okay, the total comes ’ta thirteen hundred even fer the beak and fangs.”

“That’s good. What of the dragon parts?”

Corban scrunched up his face. “I’ll take two ’o the smaller claws for a thousand a piece. It may be more’n that in the markets, but I’ll do it here and now ’ta save you the trouble.”

“Acceptable.” Gerick nodded quickly.

Corban bent down, picked up his massive chest, and opened it, pulling out a large handful of coins and sifting the larger notes out to the table surface. Afterwards, he replaced the chest and did some quick math to figure out the payment for each member of the Regulator’s since Gordan was absent. Thanking his friend, Gerick and the other Regulators left the shop and struck out for Torres’ blacksmith to finish the sales of their dragon claws and fangs.

“So how’re you feelin’?” Gerick asked of his newest member.

“I’m feeling a lot better than before. Those spider’s pack a punch if you let them get you.”

“A good reason to make sure you don’t let ’em!” Gerick chuckled.

“So do we have any other plans for the day?” Claire asked.

“Just sellin’ off these last items ’ta get your daily payments is all.”

“Okay, ’cause I’m starving, and I was gonna go out and grab a bite to eat! I’ll meet you all back at the Hall if you don’t mind.”

“No problem by me.” Gerick nodded.

“Alrighty then, I’ll see you in a while, comrades!” She announced, leaping off with her powerful legs towards the Aircab Terminal.

Fedrich watched her leave with an amused expression on his face, something Ruthy picked up on.

“Something funny?” She asked.

The Burman shook his head. “I just think it’s funny that she’s always busy, even though she just came here a few days ago. I guess her independent spirit still keeps her from staying in one place too long.”

“Maybe...” She muttered.

Fedrich looked over to the redhead, curious about her sullen expression. “Something on your mind?”

“No, not really.” She said with an idle shake of the head.

“You sure?” He pressed.

“...Yeah.”

“Okay...” He spoke quietly.

At the entrance to the Red Riot Cafe, business was going steadily as people stopped by for an exotic late afternoon meal. Waitresses were darting from table to table to take orders, patrons talking lively as the evening wore on. At one table a man waited with only a small mug at his hand, the drink barely touched. His neutral appearance of sandals, brown slacks held up by a thick belt of leather, and a loose fitting shirt made him stand out in comparison to the bright colors of the cafe. One of the workers approached him, seeing that his drink wasn’t empty.

“Do you need anything else, sir?” She asked of the man.

“I’m fine.” He replied quickly.

“Does your drink need something, maybe?” She pressed, hoping to tempt him to getting some actual food.

“Perhaps... could you get some sugar?” He prodded.

“Sure! I’ll just be a moment.” She chirped, skipping back inside the kitchen.

“I don’t see why in hell you stand this place.” Another voice added from afar.

The man looked over, seeing a female Burman a few steps away. He waved her over, and he hastily sat down in a chair and reversed it, resting her arms on the back.

“What’s wrong with a little change in locale, Claire?” He asked. “All you did was complain about the last cafe.”

“That place was too drab, and this place...” She sneered, motioning around. “It’s too damn colorful. It hurts my eyes.”

“Just suck it up, woman.” He muttered, annoyed.

“Fine, fine. So, have you made any progress yet?”

“Nothing more than what we knew before except that the target’s got more strength than we figured. It could be a lot tougher to take him down than it seemed.”

“Based on the people he’s around, it shouldn’t be any trouble at all for me.” She boasted. “I gave them all a good show, they’ll think twice before crossing me.”

“That’s provided the Regulators get involved.”

The two remained silent for a few seconds, mulling over the situation. The worker came by and poured some sugar into the man’s drink, and he stood up and paid for it while taking a swig to appease her efforts. Watching her leave, he let a small grin cross his lips.

“No sense it waiting any longer. I’ll commence the next phase, you keep watching and make sure they don’t interfere.”

Claire stood up quickly, then grinned wickedly and gave a thumbs up. “Consider it done.”

The man turned to leave, returning the gesture with a laugh. “Good luck, Claire the Demon Lance.”

“The same to you, Riyu the Phantom.”

The Author Speaks!

G'afternoon all, the author here once again to bless your eyes with more senseless drabble, apologies, and promises. First I'm sorry that this one took a while longer than before. I got myself a Playstation 2 and Final Fantasy X for my birthday, so that sucked away my time for a week before I beat it. Hopefully I won't let that happen to me again, but I was too curious to see how good it was.

And to answer a minor question, **Robshi**, Fedrich isn't a Dragon Knight. The only thing he belongs to is the Regulators, and his father was only a Sergeant in the Guards, which are separate from the Knights and act as general soldiers of Burmecia. Since he's only fought things that are on the plains, a dragon would be something to give him or anyone else a good scaring.

'Tis all I've got to say for now, peeps. Later!

Chapter Eight

This story belongs to me and my creative mind. However, most of the characters, names, and places all belong to their respective companies, so don't yell at me for copyright infringements! *Remember, Italics represent a person's thoughts or the telling of past events.*

Enjoy...

:Faraway Dreams:

Chapter Eight:

“Heavens... I’m exhausted.” Setzer sighed, dropping his quill into the well of ink by his arm.

“Sitting there all day long, I’m surprised you haven’t gone blind.” Illis chuckled.

“Well then, my humorous acquaintance, what say we leave this behind and have dinner?”

“It’s about time you agreed with me.” She reprimanded.

“I, for once, will not argue that.” Gordan added.

“Ack, I am surrounded by bitter tongues.” Setzer moaned playfully. “Come now, let’s retire to the dining hall.”

The trio stood and exited the study and walked into the hall, passing by the numerous spare guestrooms and entered the main foray of the guest manor that Setzer resided in. The front room was glittering in the evening light, the numerous crystal and glass ornaments and decorations reflecting the light all across the walls. They proceeded down the flight of stairs, then turned towards the back of the manor and entered the dining hall. Setzer spied one of the servants busily dusting the surfaces of the oak cabinets that held many different forms of artwork.

“Miss Kaerol!” He addressed of the middle-aged woman.

She quickly stopped her work and faced towards Setzer, bowing lightly. “Do you need something, Sir?”

“Would you be as so kind as to tell the cooks to prepare the evening meal?”

“Of course! Is there anything you’d request?”

“Just a simple roast and salad arrangement will suffice.”

“I’ll get on it right away, Sir.”

“Thank you greatly, Miss.” He replied with a bow of respect, facing his nephew and Illis. “Let’s pass the time in the front room, I’m sure we can entertain ourselves with stories and the like.”

They left the dining hall and again entered to the front room, taking seats in the ornate and overstuffed chairs around a central arrangement of flowers and statuettes.

“So...” Setzer began, drumming his fingers together. “...Do you know any good stories?”

“Not really.” Illis muttered.

“Nor do I.” Gordan agreed.

Setzer sighed, slouching in his seat. “I’m fresh out, too.”

The group remained silent for a long minute, eyes tracing idly across the patches of sunlight in the room and thoughts wandering to the far flung corners of their minds. A different servant came into the front room with a long rod, using it to uncover the artificial lamps to spread light into all spaces of

the manor, footsteps echoing loudly in the silence. Leaving as quietly as he came, the servant left the trio in their silent discussion.

“Once upon a while ago, this man, he had a dream. His wish at every time of day was wishing not to scream.” Setzer ratted out in a sing song voice.

Gordan gave his uncle a strange look. “What was that?”

“That was the sound of my mind falling a little more into madness.” The silver haired man muttered.

“And that’s an answer?” Illis asked.

Setzer ran his fingers through his hair, growling lightly. “It is one when you’re under the reaper’s eye!”

“If it is the danger the assassin poses, you should not be worried.” Gordan insisted.

“A man can’t help it, m’boy, and I’m just as much a man as you are. Just a few days ago my life was fine, but now... now everything’s gone to hell and I can’t find a way to fix it!”

“Uncle?”

“I’m scared, alright! I’m scared about this assassin and I don’t want to die because of something so stupid as taking over the business!” He admitted, holding his head. “I’m not used to this, Gordan, being under the threat of death. Maybe you being part of the Regulators has dulled that sensation, but facing death isn’t so easy for me.”

Before anyone could respond to his emotional outbursts, a plume of smoke flooded up from the ground by the door, dissipating to reveal a familiar form wrapped in a cloak. Setzer and the others stood up quickly, both Illis and Gordan pulling their swords free and assuming defensive stances.

“You had to say it, didn’t you.” Illis muttered. “This is the guy?”

“Yep.” Gordan said plainly.

“Well, it’s good to know I was expected.” The assassin commented. “I won’t have to deal with any fancy speeches, then.”

“You will not get by either of us, fiend.” Gordan declared. “Give up this futile effort and leave us in peace.”

“Still hoping I’ll turn tail and run?” The man chuckled, drawing his strange sword from its

sheath. “I’m sorry, but this time I won’t be leaving until either I’m dead or Setzer Gestahl is.”

“Then let’s dance!” Illis shouted, leaping forward to attack.

Gordan jumped ahead to reach Illis’ side, the two working together to attack the assassin and force him to retreat in the face of two incoming weapons. The man only smiled, then raised his sword up and reversed his hold on the hilt. With a quick motion of his fingers, a loud click sounded from the blade and it unfolded to reveal two complete swords connected by a powerful locking hinge. Stepping forward, he held the weapon firmly and blocked both attacks by the two Regulators, stunning them both.

“I’m going to make you both regret interfering with me!” He promised.

Ushering forth his strength, he again took a step forward and shoved both Regulators off balance, drawing his weapon back to attack. Lethal metal rang out as it collided with another deadly edge, the assassin finding his attack stopped by Gordan’s hasty defense. Recovering, the two Regulators went on the offensive and lashed out at the assassin, swords ringing out loudly in the large room and drawing the curious looks from servants come to see

what the commotion was. Despite two on one odds, the assassin managed to defend himself against the strikes with his double sized sword. Setzer, his faith in the skill of his nephew and his friend still strong, was sweating nervously as he watched the battle progress.

“Sir Setzer, w-what is this!?” A squeaky voice demanded.

Setzer looked around, seeing Kurin hovering nearby. He came up with a desperate idea. “Bless your curiosity, Kurin, I need your help!”

“What so you need?”

“You recall how to get to the Regulators Hall, yes? Go there as fast as you can and gather them here, I don’t know if my nephew and Illis is enough to stop him!”

“Right!”

“The heaven’s guide you, Kurin!” Setzer called out as an afterthought, watching the moogle fly out an open window.

* * *

The evening light continued to settle down, already passing by the lips of the Lindblum city

walls to bathe the city in red and orange hues. The air within the walls was perpetually busy with the sounds and light of Airships moving to and fro, the tide of society and the economy ceaseless and ignorant of time and it's will. Claire made the last of her leaps into the sky to meet these surroundings, a Transit Airship passing a stone's throw from her body as she let the wind carry her to the square next to the Regulator's Hall. Landing easily, she pushed her misplaced locks of hair back behind her pointed ears and walked to the doors of the Hall, hearing Gerick's loud laughter ringing out from within. Pushing them open, she saw her comrades all sitting around the central table, the bearded man slapping his side as he continued chuckling.

"Did I miss something?" She announced.

"Hey Claire," Fedrich called. "Gerick's still excited about our luck running into that dragon, even though he got nasty bruises on his chest from it."

"Ach, its hurts 'ta laugh, but I can't help it!" Gerick said for himself, grinning widely. "Guess how much yer share is, Claire!"

"I dunno, let's see..." She pondered. "A thousand?"

“Higher.” Fedrich smirked.

“Thousand and a half?”

“Still higher.” Gerick continued.

Claire raised an eyebrow. “Two thousand?”

“More ’n that!”

“Jeez, how much is it, then?” She asked, exasperated over the possibilities.

“Twenty one hundred Gil!” He laughed, wincing. “People fought over those claws ’n teeth worse than Treno’s nobles!”

Claire grinned as well. “That’s rich work for my first day!”

“Better not get used to it, though. Normally we only make a tenth of that working all day long.” Fedrich informed.

“That’s still better than what I used to make. I’d have to hunt for a job that paid me well, now the money just comes to me!”

“Here ya go, Claire.” Gerick spoke, offering up the pouch of Gil.

“Thanks!” She chirped, taking the heavy sack and securing it at her hip.

“So where did you go?” Fedrich asked.

“Just to the Red Riot Cafe down the street a ways. I felt like getting a sandwich, even though I’m still kinda hungry.”

“There’s still come coffee that Gerick hasn’t got to yet.” He suggested.

“Maybe in a bit, but thanks.” She returned with a smile, setting her lance against the nearby weapons rack as she took a seat at the table.

“So anythin’ interesting ’ta talk about, people?” Gerick asked.

“I just got a lot of money today.” Claire announced.

Everyone present gave a dry laugh, Fedrich speaking up. “Brilliant. We would have never known had you not told us.”

“Well, nothing’s new, so you can’t blame a lady for trying to be funny.” She countered.

“I suppose—”

Interrupting Fedrich's reply was a loud bang against the door, spooking everyone as they looked to it expecting it to fly open at any moment. Gerick stood up and opened it, immediately seeing Kurin hovering at the door, rubbing his head as he muttered in pain.

"Eh? What're you doin' here, Kurin?" Gerick asked of the moogle.

The moogle whistled loudly, pressing itself into the elder man's face. "You've got to come, quickly! Someone's attacking Sir Setzer, and he doesn't think Sir Gordan or Miss Illis can stop him!"

Everyone got to their feet quickly, worried expressions staring at the messenger moogle.

"When did it happen!?" Ruthy demanded.

"Just ten minutes ago, I think!" Kurin answered, wringing his hands together. "Kupo! Please, there's no time to waste!"

"Everyone!" Gerick started, hesitating as he saw them all pick up their weapons and collect themselves. "...Right, let's move!"

* * *

Gordan fell back and tripped over a footrest, landing on his back as he bit back the pain emanating from a wound across his right arm. Illis kept up her furious offensive, keeping the assassin from making any counter attacks, but at the growing expense of her energy and endurance. Setzer continued to remain immobile, unable to move as he watched the fight slowly take a turn for the worse.

“Damn you!” Illis swore, gasping greedily for air. “I won’t... let you... get away with this!”

“You won’t have the chance once I finish you off, wench!” The assassin retorted with equal venom.

The assassin spun his double bladed sword about, hoping to catch Illis off guard and force her sword out of her grip. The woman, however, pulled her sword back and instead drove it straight forward, halting the rotation and putting the cloaked man off balance. Lashing out wildly, she added yet another long cut into the man’s cloak, almost rendering it useless tatters as he backed off and resumed his stance. Not giving him a moment to rest, she strode forward and again attacked, swords colliding with deafening sounds as the battle raged on.

Setzer felt hope swell again as Illis proved her mettle, but he couldn’t shake his fears away.

“S-Sir?” A meek voice came from behind.

The silver haired man looked back, seeing the young daughter of one of his servants standing nearby with a leather belt in her arms. He recognized it as his trophy throwing knife, the one weapon he trusted himself with more than a bulky sword.

“My knife...” He muttered.

“S-Sir, maybe you can... can try and help stop him.” The child posed.

Setzer thought hard for a moment, wondering if he could still throw the weapon considering he hadn’t touched it in more than a decade. Even more so, he wondered if it would be a mistake to try and stop the assassin himself since his defenders were having trouble, and he was much weaker than them.

Yes, it was the sport my classmates entertained themselves with, but I never was good at it, my aim was terrible at a distance. Still... could I do it now?

“I’m sure you can do it. My mum told me you were good at it.” The child prodded on, fear evident on her small face.

Setzer knelt down to her level, putting a hand across her shoulder as he forced a smile on his face.

“Verna, was it?”

She nodded.

“Verna... I’ll give it a try.” He nodded. “Let’s have it, we should make him afraid of us, not us of him.”

She gave a weak smile, then passed the leather sheath to the man. He took it and opened the flap, seeing the polished metal blade awaiting a hand to put it into action. He stood up and faced the fight, seeing Illis on her last legs. Stepping forward, he approached the battle until a hand at his leg stopped him.

“Uncle, you should not be here!” Gordan chided in a loud whisper, still trying to tend to his wound. “It is too dangerous!”

“I’m going to help you... even though I’m not sure if I can. I can’t rely on other people forever, can I?” He posed.

“But how can you help?”

“With this.” He answered, pulling out the throwing knife and holding it at the ready.

“A... throwing knife?”

“Another part of my study of the Mist Continent’s wars.” Setzer explained, taking careful aim at the assassin, waiting. “Let’s hope my aim isn’t rusty.”

Luckily, the wait wasn’t long as the assassin used his double sword to knock Illis off balance and force her to the ground. He raised the weapon up, spinning it with intent to end the life of the woman that troubled him so greatly.

“Hold, bastard!” Setzer bellowed.

The assassin hesitated a moment, looking to his target as the man threw the weapon for all his worth. The blade spun through the air as a blur, but the edge only caught the assassin lightly on the arm as he dodged to the side. The man grinned, but his expression changed rapidly into one of shock. He glanced down, seeing that Illis’ sword was thrust into his midsection, the woman grinning wickedly.

“Game over.” She declared.

Pulling the blade free, the assassin gasped in pain and clutched his stomach, blood staining his hands and clothing. Looking up, his vision was glazed over as he stared out to nothingness. After a few seconds, the double bladed sword fell out of his hands with a

clatter and he wavered, falling over as death claimed his soul. Illis regained her footing, gasping heavily for air as she used her sword to prop herself up.

“Are you okay, Illis?” Gordan asked, worried.

“I’m fine.” She wheezed, looking back to the nobleman. “You okay? That cut looks nasty.”

“I think I have it under control for the time being, but I will need to have a doctor tend to it.” He replied.

Setzer snapped out of his fear induced trance, looking at the body of the assassin. Shaking his head about, he looked to the staircase and doors to see every final servant and worker silently witnessing the event.

“Come... come now, all of you!” He declared, clapping his hands to get their eyes. “Don’t be lackadaisical, someone gather the authorities and bring them here! We need medical supplies, sweepers to clean up the blood and broken glass, let’s go, everyone.”

The workers all made various noises to agree, the group dispersing to gather materials as a few ran for the front doors, avoiding the body by a wide radius as they sought the Guards. Setzer strode over to his

nephew with renewed strength, helping the man get off the floor and onto a sitting chair to better clean the wound up. He then walked to Illis, taking her shoulders and leading her to a couch to lay down on, her face covered in sweat from the effort she made.

“Are you going to be okay?” He asked, putting the sword back into the sheath at her hip.

“I’ll be fine... I just gotta catch my breath.” She reassured the man, offering a weak grin.

“Hold still, I’ll get you some water.” He said, briskly walking to the kitchen.

The workers began swarming across the front room to reorganize it as he left, the daring ones picking up the body of the assassin and placing him on an old sheet to stop the blood from staining the wood. The front doors opened up suddenly, and the rest of the Regulators poured inside, weapons drawn and ready. Stunned at the scene, they looked in surprise as the servants gave them little notice, too absorbed by their work and current surprises. Ruthy was first to notice her older sister resting on the couch, and she let a squeal of terror escape her lips as she ran to her side.

“Illis!! Illis, are you okay!?” She asked, almost throwing herself across the woman.

“I’m fine, Ruthy.” Illis said weakly. “I’m just exhausted. Gordan’s the one to be worried about, help him.”

Ruthy looked over to the nobleman, immediately going to his side when she saw blood staining his otherwise white dress shirt. She made quick work of cutting the excess material off, inspecting the wound thoroughly as servants came and provided her with medical bandages and herbs to speed the healing process. Fedrich went to his side as well, concern on his face.

“What happened? Did that assassin attack?” The Burman asked.

“Yes, and it was a difficult struggle to keep him from carrying out his mission.” Gordan nodded.

Fedrich smiled, then stood up and looked around at the battle scene, broken glass all over the ground and some furniture overturned and cut up. Kurin, quietly catching his breath, assumed a seat in a far corner of the room as he rested his more than sore wings. The other Regulators all paced into the center

of the room, waiting nervously until Setzer came back with a large decanter of water.

“Oh? Are you the Regulators?” The silver haired man asked.

“Yeah, yer messenger moogle Kurin came and got us in a mighty big hurry!” Gerick explained. “Where’s the assassin?”

“Dead, thankfully.” Setzer sighed, pointing to the body. “Illis managed to strike him a mortal wound when he was distracted.”

“He’s dead!?” Claire blurted out.

“Dead as one can get.” Illis replied. “What? Thought we couldn’t do it?”

“No...” She said, hesitating as she approached to stare at the body. “I’m just... upset, I didn’t get a chance to fight him!”

“I’ll let you have the next one, then.” Illis insisted.

Gerick walked over to Gordan’s side, the bearded man holding his ever present smile. “You look like ya had a fun break.”

“As entertaining as any normal day in the field, I say.” He said, moving his arm to encompass the room. “I would be more inclined to have been in the field instead of being stalked by assassins and injured like this.”

“Hold still.” Ruthy reprimanded, taking a firm hold of his shoulder.

“My apologies.” Gordan said with a pained grunt.

Setzer sighed heavily, looking around at the collection of Regulators in his home. He was surprised by their diversity, even having two Burmans despite the prominent human population of Lindblum. Pouring a large glass of water, he passed it to Illis and set the decanter onto a nearby table, tugging on his coat.

“I’m sorry, Gerick, was it?” He began, addressing the bearded man. “I wouldn’t have called you here if I knew we would have won. I was worried greatly that the assassin would be too strong for them.”

“Ah, it’s no problem. We’ve dealt with this kinda thing before.” He said, waving the excuse away.

“Still, I am sorry that I took away two of your members from their rightful jobs.”

“Ach, ya must be as noble as Gordan says, you can’t let anythin’ go by without havin’ to apologize for it ten times over!” Gerick laughed.

“I suppose I’m guilty of that.” Setzer grinned. “Please, relax and have a seat, my servants can take care of business here.”

“Thanks.” Gerick nodded, sitting heavily into a chair as he leaned his battle hammer against its arm.

“So, what kind—”

Before Setzer could continue with his question, a whistling sound broke through the front room and impacted strongly on his chest. He looked down as he fell back, seeing the middle part of a lance sticking out of his torso, blood beginning to stain his clothing and his vision. Setzer Gestahl fell with a quiet thud onto the wood floor, death draining his soul away as his eyes glazed over into an empty stare at the ceiling. Everyone froze, seeing the heir of the massive Airship business lying dead before their eyes, even though the assassin was long since dead.

“Target killed. The deed is done.” A cold voice called from the edge of the room.

Everyone looked back to the source of the voice with slow motions, seeing the female Burman standing with her arm outstretched from her attack, a cruel grin on her lips and dark intentions circling through the depths of her eyes.

Chapter Nine

This story belongs to me and my creative mind. However, most of the characters, names, and places all belong to their respective companies, so don't yell at me for copyright infringements! *Remember, Italics represent a person's thoughts or the telling of past events.*

Enjoy...

:Faraway Dreams:

Chapter Nine:

Everyone looked back to the source of the voice with slow motions, seeing the female Burman standing with her arm outstretched from her attack, a cruel grin on her lips and dark intentions circling through the depths of her eyes. Snorting a laugh, she straightened herself up and looked around, relishing the unbelieving eyes staring at her.

“What?” She asked.

“C-Claire?” Fedrich sputtered, shocked at the turn of events.

“Oh, you must be surprised that I just killed Edvard Gestahl’s son!” She said, as if surprised. “You see, I wasn’t really part of your little team of wannabe heroes. I’m just as involved with killing that man as Riyu here was.”

“You’re a spy, then?” Illis posed, anger again seething into her voice.

“I was supposed to make sure no one got involved in the mission, since Riyu knew that Setzer’s nephew Gordan was part of the Regulators. After he saw that Gordan was gonna interfere with it, he had me join you so I could warn him if any of you tried to follow his lead.” Claire explained further, gesticulating with her hands. “Th’problem is, I was too slow on my part, and now he’s dead. Better for me, though, ’cause now I get the entire payment to myself!”

“Traitors like you aren’t gonna get any money, ‘cause yer not leavin’ this place ’cept to go ’ta jail!” Gerick promised, hefting his hammer.

“Like any of you can stop me.” She said mockingly.

“You can’t beat five on one odds.” Fedrich insisted, drawing his sword out. “Don’t make us hurt you.”

Claire laughed loudly, glaring at her fellow Burman. “You? Hurt me? Did you forget that I’ve wasted a close dozen monsters without breaking a sweat!? Not a single one of you has even come close to besting me!”

Illis got to her feet slowly, pulling her blood stained sword free despite her arm’s arguments. “I killed your partner, so don’t go making promises you can’t keep.”

Claire glared at the dark clothed woman, sneering. “You can barely stand, much less fight.”

“You underestimate me.” Illis warned, assuming her attack stance.

The female Burman looked around at the others present, sighing. “Peh, you people are worthless to me.”

With a single jump, she cleared the length of the room and landed next to Setzer’s body. She pulled the lance free and used the blade to cut off his ring finger, taking the digit into her hands. Pulling sharply, she tugged loose the two rings decorating it, one a simple gold band and another bearing a large

diamond and smaller pearly stones. Securing both rings to her pocket, she gave everyone a last looking over before tossing the finger aside. The Regulators all moved in to attack, but the female Burman used her lance to pin down a nearby worker. The woman cried out in terror and pain, the lance's sharp tip pressed hard against her midsection as her back was flush with the wall.

"Hold it, or she dies!" Claire warned, pushing harder and drawing another cry from the servant.

The group all stopped, not wanting to risk another casualty to an already failed mission. Claire grinned again, looking around her environment to find a chance to escape the manor.

"You will not get away with this atrocity." Gordan informed, struggling to keep himself steady.

"I already have!" She corrected.

"Claire! Tell me... why did you betray us!" Fedrich shouted, getting her attention.

She laughed again, still bearing her evil smile. "You can't betray people you never allied yourself with, Fedrich."

"Still...!"

“Don’t speak!” She ordered. “I’m taking my leave of you weaklings, and you can call me Claire the Demon Lance from now on.”

“Don’t do this!” Fedrich pressed, struggling with himself.

“Farewell, *comrade*.” She sneered.

Drawing her lance back, she freed her captive and made a quick run for one of the large windows nearby. Swinging her lance out, she shattered the obstacle and leapt outside of the manor before the Regulators could catch up. Fedrich came to the window before anyone else could reach it, using his eyes and keen hearing to try to find her. Despite his efforts, she had disappeared into the surrounding buildings as if she had never been there. Ruthy came to his side, putting a hand to his shoulder as she looked for the treacherous woman as well.

“Fedrich? Is she...?”

“Gone... Claire’s gone.” He growled.

“The Gods damn her.” Gordan swore, kneeling next to his deceased uncle. “How could have I let such a foul woman go pass me without warning?”

“It’s my fault, Gordan.” Gerick admitted. “I let ‘er into the Regulators while you were gone. I shoulda known better’n ’ta trust her outright like that.”

“No, my friend, is it not your fault. You could not have predicted her betrayal, nor could have any of us.” He reminded, struggling with his inner feelings. “The treachery that followed my uncle... seems to have been more than he ever let on, and now we have all paid the price, some more than others.”

“Gordan...” Illis whispered, sharing a sense of the sadness the nobleman felt.

“Ashes to ashes, and dust to dust.” Gordan spoke quietly, closing his uncle’s eyes gently. “I hope you’ll find rest in the afterworld, uncle Setzer.”

“What are we going to do now?” Fedrich asked tensely from the window. “We can’t just let her get away with this!”

“What can we do? You know as well as I that anyone can immerse themselves into this city and disappear without much difficulty. There is little chance that we can find her now.” Gordan explained, standing up.

“How... how can you say that so easily, she just killed your uncle!” Fedrich blurted, surprised.

“I know that, Fedrich.” Gordan spoke harshly. “But I alone cannot do much. I will contact the Guards and post a reward for her capture and arrest.”

“Don’t let it get to you, Fedrich.” Illis added. “I want as much to hunt the bitch down, but we can’t just run around the city looking for her blindly. We have to use the Guard’s help for this, no other way around it.”

Fedrich was about to reply, but he growled and pounded his fist against the wall, frustrated by his inability to stop the woman he’d grown to trust. Ruthy looked at him, concern apparent on her face, but the Burman strode off before she could offer any words of comfort. He paced past the Regulators and to the dead assassin’s body, staring at it as the scent of death wafted about his nose.

“So he’s our only source of information now, the dead.” Fedrich concluded.

“Yes. Perhaps there is some information on his person about their mission or who hired them to kill my uncle.” Gordan speculated, walking also to the assassin’s side.

“Hey, the headband.” Fedrich began, kneeling to get a closer look at the item. “That’s an odd symbol.”

“That it is...” Gordan agreed, reaching down to untie it and look it over. “Stained black leather, and the image of a... rose with bloodied thorns?”

“Maybe it’s part of some group he’s with?” Illis tried.

“It could just be a decoration for all we know.” Gerick countered with a sigh. “Maybe we ought ’ta have Captain Cecil look it over, he’d probably know fer sure.”

“He should be here shortly, their armory is not far from here.” Gordan nodded, looking over the assassin’s things. “It looks like he carried nothing more than his double sword and some Gil. There is nothing else to identify him with.”

“Damned luck.” Fedrich cursed.

“Gods, what a mess.” Cecil grunted. “You’re sure you can take care of the rest?”

“I do not think it will be difficult, Captain. Thank you for coming so soon.” Gordan nodded.

“Hey, for helping me with the Fire Bandit, I owed you one as it is.” Cecil said with a grin. “I’ll have my men get posters up right away and scour this city for any leads.”

“Cecil, did you recognize the symbol on the assassin’s headband?” Fedrich asked.

He shook his head. “Nah. It doesn’t look like any group in Lindblum I know of. Treno would be a good guess... but anything shady could involve that place.”

“I know...” Fedrich muttered, well aware of that city’s less than friendly atmosphere.

“Don’t worry about it, kid. Word’ll filter into the Treno underground for the reward, so those thieves and mercenaries might help us turn her in!”

“Such is the standards of loyalty for Treno’s miscreants.” Gordan commented with a growl.

“Right... so you need anything else?”

“Not at the moment. Thank you again, Captain.” Gordan said with a light bow.

“Alright, we’ll take our leave!” Cecil replied with a fast salute. “Let’s get goin’, men!”

The few guards present all followed their captain as he left the manor, the sound of shifting armor and murmuring voices also departing to leave the few present in a depressing silence.

“You gonna be okay?” Gerick asked from his place near the front door.

“I... I will do my best to stay well.”

“That’s good ‘ta hear. I don’t want you to end up bein’ some depressed hermit after all this.”

Gordan stifled a laugh. “Thank you for your efforts, though I wish to be alone now to reflect on this...”

“O’ course.” Gerick nodded. “Let’s head out, Fedrich.”

“Sure.” The Burman agreed, stepping to the front door.

“Fedrich? Why do you still have that headband?” Gordan asked, eyeing the black strip of material in his hand.

“This? I figure... maybe we’ll need it for something.”

The nobleman gave him a strange look, but nodded regardless. The two Regulators closed the door silently, leaving Gordan alone to mull over the day's tragedies. Walking through the small courtyard, they met the two sisters at the front gate and proceeded back to the Hall.

"How is he?" Illis asked first off.

"He's gonna be fine, just needs some time alone to grieve." Gerick answered.

"Did Mr. Cecil find out anything else?" Ruthy also wondered.

"Nope, 'though he said that he'd get his men around lookin' for her and to post a reward for her capture."

The redhead looked crestfallen, but kept quiet as she walked alongside everyone else. Glancing over to Fedrich, she saw the Burman holding an angered expression, eyes unfocused in inner thought. She then noticed his eyes were looking down towards a scrap of black cloth tightly held in his hand, digits rubbing the material around.

What is that he's holding? Is it something from the assassin? From Claire?...

Curiosity prodding her, she stepped over to his side and nudged his arm. “How are you?”

“Okay, I guess.” Fedrich replied after a moment.

“You look troubled to me.” She said, as if correcting him.

“Of course I am.” He stated a bit louder. “First we couldn’t protect Setzer Gestahl from being attacked by that assassin, then he dies because of Claire betraying us. Everything’s just gone horribly wrong.”

Ruthy tried to think of something to comfort the warrior, but she couldn’t think of anything to say.

“I don’t get it, Ruthy, why did she do that?” He continued.

“Well... she was partners with the assassin, so she wasn’t ever concerned with us, I think.” Ruthy speculated. “She played us all for fools because we were close to Setzer, used us to get to him.”

“She never did act like a killer to me. Tough and arrogant, maybe, but not a murderer.”

“Probably part of her skill to gain other’s trust.”

Fedrich sighed, confusion evident on his features. “I just don’t get it. How can someone be so friendly to others and so cruel as to kill them?”

“Some people are like that, Fedrich, not everyone is as nice to one another as you’d think. Evil people are all over the world, some that are open with it and some that disguise it. Elric was never one to hide his evil... but Claire does so we don’t suspect her.” She looked to his eyes, hoping to draw his own. “Does it really bother you that much?”

“I’ve... just never been betrayed by someone like this before. It hurts to think that the Claire I knew was a lie.” Fedrich admitted.

Ruthy sighed wistfully and put a hand on his shoulder, finally getting his attention. “You’ll be fine. Things will get better.”

Fedrich smiled warmly. “Thanks for listening to this poor guy’s woes.”

“Anytime.” She smiled back.

* * *

The normally clear skies over Lindblum seemed darker, puffy clouds blocking sunlight and spreading patches of shadow across the metropolis. To casual

observers, the addition of clouds made the day look prettier, but to a small gathering near Lindblum's cemetery, they only provided a greater sense of things lost.

“...Setzer, though a upper class nobleman and heir to one of Gaia’s greatest industries, was also a man of simple tastes and approachable manners. His deeds were many, some for good, some for ill, but all with the knowledge that somehow he had changed the world, had left his mark in history. In the end, he died a man standing up to a great challenge eagerly, assuming a position of great importance with the same nonchalant attitude as a boy buying his first wrap of candy. He died with his hopes set aside for the sake of the people who benefited from his labor. Setzer Gestahl, my uncle, obeyed the will of the people before his own... lived for the people before himself, and that is his final remembrance.”

Gordan wiped at his eyes gingerly, stepping down from the small podium as the priest came up front. “Now, after making his testimony and life clear to the heavens, shall we offer our final prayers before returning him to the earth from whence he came. May the soul of Setzer Gestahl be with his beloved

ones in heaven, and may his deeds and life be remembered by the living.”

The priest stepped away from the podium and to the side of the coffin, the wooden casket covered in flowers and pictures of the departed. The attendees stood and walked by, offering last words as they quietly talked to one another about his life and his past, some crying and others looking angry. After several minutes, Gordan came forward and looked at the images of his uncle, some in his youth and others just before his passing.

I am sorry I was not able to save you, uncle... I hope you are happier where you are now, among your parents and your friends...

“You okay?” A voice asked from his side.

He looked over to the voice, seeing Illis standing quietly, arms crossed over her black dress as she waited patiently. Although the funeral was being held for family and close friends only, she had insisted that she come with him to pay her respects to the person she barely knew.

“I will be fine.” He replied quietly.

Illis grinned weakly. “That’s good. I don’t think Setzer would be happy to see you angry with

yourself.”

“That is true. He always wanted us to be honest with ourselves.”

“Do you need more time?” She asked.

“...No, we can go. Better to leave with good memories than to let them slide away to sad ones.”

The two turned to leave the coffin, the priest making final arrangements with Setzer’s parents before leaving as well. Illis’ hand reached out and gripped Gordan’s tightly, reassuring him of her support. The nobleman looked at her for a moment, then smiled and squeezed back in acceptance.

* ^ * ^ *

The Author Speaks!

Greetings, all, time once again to inform you of things that need informing. This time around, though, I don’t have much to say, really. College is chugging ahead full speed, so I might not update as often as normal due to more homework and projects. I’ll try my best to keep those from interfering with my writing schedule, but sometimes it can’t be helped, so bear with me. Additionally to that, I

updated the Information Database with new characters 'n stuff, so check it out!

Peace, everyone!

Chapter Ten

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Enjoy...

:Faraway Dreams:

Chapter Ten:

“It’s a shame to waste a nice day like this hunting monsters.” Ruthy commented, taking a deep breath of the late morning air.

“I agree.” Fedrich nodded.

“It pays enough to let you two think about wasting a day to relax, so don’t complain.” Illis reminded.

“Ah sis, you wouldn’t even care if the day was bad or not.” Ruthy chuckled.

“I might care if it was raining.”

“Don’t go jinxing things!”

“Come on, look at the skies, it’s been clear today.”

“You never know. Weather’s a strange thing here, remember?”

Illis harrumphed a reply, turning back to the plains ahead. The sun shined down across the grassy fields in gold patches, clouds slowly meandering through the skies. The temperature was already getting warm, the summer heat promising a long term stay over the plateau.

“I wonder why she’s cranky today?” Fedrich pondered quietly.

“I think she’s still sore over the whole incident with Claire.” Ruthy answered.

Fedrich’s expression fell, reminded of the unwanted memories.

“Hey, sorry if I upset you. I know it was tough on you, too.” The redhead apologized, seeing his

somber expression.

“It’s alright.” He said, waving it off.

If only it were okay... I still don’t know why Claire betrayed us, and there’s been no word about her for four days already. I’ll never be able to rest easy until I find her and make her pay for her crime...

Shaking the morose thoughts from his head, Fedrich resumed his observation of the land ahead, ears alert for any out of place sounds. The past few days had been easy, few monsters at all appearing around Lindblum despite the warmer temperatures. He would be worried about earning his pay if it weren’t for the fact that they took down that dragon days before, his pouch of Gil still considerably thick with coins.

*Coin*s I earned alongside her...

“I don’t like this.” Gerick’s rough voice commented.

Everyone stopped at his vague statement, the elder Regulator stroking his beard idly as he paused in thought.

“How so?” Gordan asked.

“Come on, you can all tell it’s been quieter here than normal! Somethin’s got the monsters all spooked enough to keep outta plain sight.” Gerick explained.

“Maybe they’re all taking a mid-summer vacation.” Illis suggested with a hint of humor.

“Unlikely, the heat of the summer season normally draws them out in greater numbers, not diminish them.” The nobleman corrected, ever serious. “Gerick is right, this is unusual behavior, something must be wrong.”

“But what could it be?” Fedrich asked.

“I dunno, but it’s sure gettin’ me nervous.” The elder man mused.

“Well, I personally think it’s a good thing they aren’t around.” Illis declared, walking ahead on their normal trail. “It’s not like we can do anything about it, so let’s just enjoy the moment.”

The others hesitated over her opinion, but agreed to it and continued with their patrol after a second. The warm air on the plains whispered by, telling of hotter sunlight to come.

“That’s got to be a new record, not a single monster around.” Fedrich commented, removing his hat to shake his hair around, loosening captive sweat.

“Better than being overrun by them.” Ruthy added in.

“That’s true.” He nodded.

“Still, it means no money for the day.” Illis groaned, shaking her head. “Maybe we should have gone on a break instead of killing our legs in this heat.”

“No use in complaining, ladies!” Gerick reprimanded. “I guess we get ’ta have an early break this time.”

“I’m gonna go splurge for once, you coming, sis?” Illis asked of her younger counterpart.

“Sure!” She agreed quickly. “You want to come, too, Fedrich?”

“I’ll come later. I’m going to take a quick nap, this heat’s getting to me.”

“We’ll be waiting at the Red Riot Cafe, then.” Illis informed, walking off with her sister.

Fedrich stretched idly, looking at the two remaining. “Either of you two have anything planned?”

“Nope.” Gerick chuckled. “Probably just gonna have myself a drink.”

“The Regional Library is my destination for the meanwhile.” Gordan answered.

“Well, see you later, then!” Fedrich spoke, waving them off as he left for the Hall.

The Hall was just as warm as the rest of the city, but lucky enough to have a weak cross breeze drifting through it’s windows to cool off the interior slightly. The Burman took off his vest and hat, tossing them onto the dresser and flopping down onto his bed. Sighing heavily, he crossed his arms behind his head and let his muscles relax, his mind slipping into random thoughts. Invariably, his thoughts traced back to the incident a few days ago, and his mood fell sourly as a face and name came up in his inner vision.

“Claire...” He whispered, recalling the whole series of events involved with the treacherous woman.

What is it about her that I can't let go of? She was a traitor and a killer just as bad as that assassin, as bad as Elric. She killed off Gordan's uncle without remorse, even broke off all ties with us by running. She never even gave us her true name until she betrayed us...

Fedrich rolled onto his side, burying his muzzle into the thin feather pillow.

The Claire I knew, that I called a friend... was all a lie...

A sudden knocking at the front door, muffled by the walls, sounded in Fedrich's pointed ears. Standing and throwing his vest on again, he left his small room to the door, the person knocking much harder than before and pouring words into the wooden barrier. Opening it, he came face to face with Cecil, the captain looking worn out and excited over something.

“Cecil?” Fedrich stated, arching an eyebrow at his appearance.

“Fedrich, good enough, I got news!” The captain blurted, grabbing at the Burman’s vest. “Come with me, we got a witness who saw Claire leave Lindblum!”

Fedrich's tired mind snapped into action immediately, and he nodded. "Lead on."

"To the Armory!" He declared, taking off down the streets to the Aircab terminal.

The two warriors ran hard down the staircases, dodging past groups of people and offering apologies on the fly. Cecil gasped for breath as he pushed his legs on, Fedrich maintaining his energy, as his legs weren't pressed for such exertion. They only slowed and rested once they boarded an Aircab, taking the chance to reclaim their strength before again running to the Armory. After ten minutes, the two barged into the crowded structure and walked into a small room with a guard and a castle mechanic sitting at a table.

"Captain!" The guard saluted.

"At ease, Bremen." Cecil said, dismissing the man.

"Sir!" He replied, leaving the room.

"Now... Mr. Verner." Cecil began between gasps for air. "Tell him what you told me."

The mechanic shifted around. "Just yesterday, I saw this strange looking Burmecian boarding one of

the Exodus Airships on B level. She looked odd because she was dressed sparsely and was looking everywhere, like she was expecting someone, 'cept no one met her before she boarded."

"Did she have blonde hair and light gray fur?" Fedrich questioned.

"Yeah, yeah!" He nodded. "I've heard that there are some people from Burmecia who live in their deserts and dress like that because of the heat. Maybe she's from there?"

"That's not important." Fedrich pressed. "Do you know where that Airship was going? When it left?"

"Well, I wasn't stationed around the ship, but I heard one of the attendants say it was bound for South Gate. I don't know when it left, but it's long gone now."

Fedrich and Cecil shared a knowing look.

"She couldn't have gone far from there, but it's out of my district now. I can't follow her with my men without causing problems at the border." The Captain explained.

"She's going back to Treno, there's no where else for her to go except there." Fedrich grumbled.

“Goddess damn her, she’ll be able to hide in there forever.”

“Not if we act fast,” Cecil corrected. “That’s why I rushed over to your Hall. She may be gone from our eyes, but her trail might stay warm enough to follow. We can alert the local authorities and they can back your hunt where I can’t.”

“Would they really?” The Burman asked, recalling the guards lack of concern for people’s needs.

“For an assassin of one of their greatest industrial leaders? You bet they would, the money invested in that is more than enough to keep the nobles interested, and the nobles interest is the guards interest.” Cecil explained with a knowing smile.

“Yeah... yeah, yeah!” Fedrich repeated under his breath, the pieces falling into place. “This is it, we finally have a chance! Does Gordan know? Anyone?”

“No, I only came to the Hall once he told me the news, and I didn’t see any of your friends on the way.”

“Of all the luck.” Fedrich muttered. “I know Ruthy and Illis are at the Red Riot, so I’ll get them.

If you can get Gordan at the National Library and go back to the Hall, we can meet there and try to work out something.”

“Alright.” Cecil nodded, looking back at the mechanic. “You’ve been a great help. We don’t need you any longer, so you can go.”

“And the reward? There was a thousand Gil reward for information leading to her capture.” The mechanic spoke with an eager tone.

“Keep in touch with the Guards, if we get her based on your word, we’ll deliver.” Cecil rushed, leaving the room and Armory with Fedrich alongside.

The two stepped outside the armory, a moderate wind crossing their paths as they hesitated a moment to collect their thoughts. Nodding, they split apart and ran off to their destinations.

* * *

“You couldn’t find Gerick anywhere?” Ruthy asked.

“No.” Fedrich replied. “He said he was going for a drink, so who knows if he’s home or still out?”

“Hell, that’s perfect.” The dark clothed woman swore.

“I’ll go and see if he’s at the Hall.” Fedrich spoke, jumping ahead.

Leaping quickly up the flights of stairs winding along the Theater District, the Burman looked across the city at the passing Airships and rushing populace. Despite his constant drama that seemed to pick his life up and shake it around, the city never changed, a constant among changing times. Finally landing at the entrance to the Hall, he stepped inside and looked around, Gerick’s bearded face absent from the room.

“Gerick?” He called out. “You here?”

Silence.

Fedrich walked around the central table to the end of the room, staring up the corridor to the second floor of the Hall. Fedrich stepped up the stairs slowly, realizing that this was the first time he had ever set foot up there. He made the final step and was presented with a small hallway, two doors at the end and a single window open to the outside winds. Only the droning background noise of

Airships greeted his sensitive ears, so he walked down the hall with a gentle pace.

“Gerick?” Fedrich continued.

The Burman stepped to one of the doors and knocked, then opened it a crack just as the opposing door followed suit. Fedrich looked into the room, seeing a collection of furniture and materials meant for a woman under a layer of dust and muted sunlight. A thick hand fell onto his shoulder, giving Fedrich a start as he looked back to see Gerick with a serious expression.

“Goddess, you gave me a scare!” Fedrich commented.

“You needed me fer something?” Gerick asked in a cut and even voice.

“Er... well, I...” The Burman started, looking back to the obviously untreaded room. Gerick stepped forward against the Burman’s body and reached out, taking the handle and closing the door with a gentle pull. The elder man then stepped back and looked at the Burman, the two remaining silent over the unspoken questions.

“I’ll ask again, you needed somethin’?” Gerick repeated.

“I wanted to tell you something...” Fedrich drifted off, mind filled with questions about the strange room.

“Next time be sure ’an keep outta other people’s rooms.”

Fedrich nodded, then watched Gerick step down the hall for the stairs. The bearded man hesitated at the top of the staircase and looked back, seeing the Burman still standing where he was, his eyes betraying the obvious flood of questions in his mind. He sighed, knowing well what was on his mind.

“You gonna play statue all day?”

“Oh, sorry!” Fedrich again apologized, moving to him.

The two descended the stairs, both silent until Gerick sat down at his chair and picked up his mug of cold coffee, holding it protectively in thought.

“Um, Gerick...”

“I suppose yer curious about the room?” He finished.

“Well, yes...” Fedrich admitted.

Gerick heaved another sigh. “It’s alright, you deserve ta hear the story that goes with it.”

“Okay.” Fedrich said cautiously, taking a seat next to the leader of the Regulators.

“Ya see, long ago, when I first started up the Regulators, I was always in a pinch for members. I couldn’t offer pay that was better’n than the Security teams, so I’d get those who were jest out to make a difference, not a paycheck.”

“After a long while, a wholesome and hearty woman came ’ta my door and asked for a place in the Regulators. I agreed, so long as she could beat me in battle. To my surprise, she drew out the biggest mother ’o a sword I’d seen, damn near as long as she was tall. So we fought ’n she lost, but I still let her on. At the time it was jest me as the leader, Gordan, who was a bit ’o a veteran of the group, Macky, and two other guys named Jon and Darvin. The lady’s name was Precilla, ’though she preferred being called just Cil.”

“Well, as time went by, her and I got ’ta know one another pretty well, although we did fight a lot over things. It was one afternoon back about a year ’n a half ago that we got into some big trouble.”

I thought I had seen it all. Legions o' monsters in an exodus from a forest fire. A damn near legendary war between the Goblins'n Vices. Imps by the hundreds declaring war against the humans and the bloody fights from it. This took the cake, all of it, and the drinks and present included. We were chasin' down a rogue Coral Dragon that wandered onto the plains when we heard a roar from above. I looked up, and death itself came flying down from the low clouds and crashed to the earth, it's size standing five times my own height.

A Grand Dragon.

The Grand Dragon used a mere swipe of it's paw to sent the Coral Dragon runnin', and it then turned it's black eyes on us. I hefted my hammer, ready to go after this demon will my all, but Cil, she put a hand on my arm and stopped me.

"Leave," she said sternly.

"Not without you, I ain't," I called back.

She looked at me, her eyes serious and pretty, then gave me a knock on the head with her knuckle.

"See now, either you go and get help while I die, or we all die, simple, eh?" She told me.

I nodded and ran, my brain betrayin' my heart at the moment, the others all alongside me in retreat.

The Grand Dragon stamped forward, and I looked back to watch Cil. She hefted that behemoth of a blade with her callused hands, and I could just imagine that perky smile on her lips jest taunting that dragon to no ends. She then charged with a heart wrenching cry, her strike carving a bloody groove in it's scaly hide. The Grand Dragon lurched in it's movement, and I watched with my palms sweaty and my heart racing.

The Grand Dragon stood it's ground without a problem, then reached down and took her in it's jaws and clenched down. I turned away, but the blood still stained my mind's eye. I fell apart, the beast still lived, and Cil died. With a mighty whip of it's wings, the damned monster took to the skies and flew off like nothin' happened. I didn't bother to go find her body, I didn't want to face up to the truth. The other Regulators all stood by me, and I merely walked away. They followed me, no questions. They understood.

“I came back to ‘ta Hall and closed her door, and it’s never been opened since then.”

Fedrich swallowed deeply. “I’m so sorry, I never
—”

“Don’t.” Gerick ordered. “Cil was never much fer
apologies, and neither am I. Leave the past where it
is.”

“Why didn’t you ever talk about her?” A voice
asked.

Gerick looked around, seeing both Illis and Ruthy
standing at the door, quietly waiting for their leader
to finish his sad reminiscing. He snorted a chuckle,
shaking his head.

“No reason to, ’ya never asked.”

“But it’s better to talk about your sorrows instead
of keeping them inside.” Ruthy added in her sister’s
defense.

Gerick lifted a hand to quell any other statements.
“Let’s leave it be, I’ve moved on since, and thinkin’
on it isn’t gonna make me feel any better.”

Illis nodded an agreement, then took a seat at the
table while Ruthy went for a drink.

“Now Fedrich, ‘ya said you had somethin’ to tell
me?” Gerick asked, going back to the original topic.

“Oh, that’s right!” The Burman barked. “Cecil found someone who knows where Claire has gone off to!”

Everyone went silent at the surprising news, so Fedrich continued. “One of the mechanics at the Docks said that he saw someone who looked like her boarding an Airship bound for South Gate. If it is her, then she’s definitely going to Treno. If we hurry, we can make arrangements to get there and hunt her down!”

“Does Gordan know?” Gerick questioned.

Fedrich shook his head. “Cecil’s looking for him, and they’ll come here once he’s found.”

Silence held tight in the room as everyone took in the information. Fedrich’s eyes glanced from person to person, hoping to see a reaction that met his own. A deep crack sounded in the air, the Hall settling on its foundations.

“Treno...” Ruthy muttered. “That place... can we really find here in there?”

“The odds are slim, but Cecil said that if we go quickly, we might be able to find her trail and bring her to justice! If it wasn’t for some border laws, he’d

go with us and bring his best men as well.” Fedrich waved his hand about, trying to illustrate his words.

“That place is a cesspool of criminals and thieves, they say. She’d fit in there perfectly.” Illis commented. “We just have to wait for Gordan to come, he’s got the most to gain from catching the traitor.”

“Agreed.” Fedrich added. “Though I’m willing to chase her down alone right now.”

“Eager still, eh?” Gerick asked.

“She betrayed my trust... all our trust. I want to find out why, and make her pay for her crime.”

For a while, the Regulators sat in uneasy silence, waiting for Cecil to arrive with Gordan and a decision on their plan of action. The sun drifted closer to the horizon, clouds flowing farther along the skyline and bringing thicker puffs of moisture to the region with the look of rain. The incessant ticking of the small clock above the front doors sang out the progression of seconds and minutes, and after a half hour, the two awaited people burst into the Hall.

“Got ’yer guy, Fed!” Cecil announced, Gordan stepping into the house.

“Captain Cecil already informed me on the situation. Has anything else new come about?” The nobleman asked.

“We’re just waiting to know what your thoughts are about it.” Illis answered. “I think all of us are at least thinking about hunting her down.”

Gordan walked over to the central table and took a seat, folding his hands in thought. “On the eve of uncle Setzer’s death, I informed my parents about the situation at hand. Mother and father both agreed that action must be taken, that the mercenaries and assassins of the continent must be taught that the Gestahl name is not to be treaded upon in such a manner. By now messengers have arrived in Treno to alert Setzer’s subordinates about the situation, and that mother shall be assuming command of the Gestahl Industries.”

“Really?” Illis blurted, eyes wide. “I thought they were still reeling from the money scandals.”

“It seems that they have been working much harder to repay their wrongdoings than I suspected.” Gordan spoke, motioning with his hands. ‘Already the family name has regained much of it’s former reputation. Besides, with no surviving members of the Gestahl name able to assume the title, then

mother is automatically in place to do just that.’ He paused a moment, picking his next words carefully. “My parents have thus decided to relocate to Reno, using the Gestahl manor as their new home to run the business. They have asked me... to return back home and to take control of the business divisions here in Lindblum.”

That made everyone forget their comments on the matter. Gordan stared at the table surface, knowing that he would have to quit his role as a Regulator, something his colleagues wouldn’t be happy about. For a long minute silence dominated the room, even Illis unable to find her voice.

“I, before joining the Regulators, was training myself daily to take on this job, to manage the business deals with Lindblum as local representative of the Gestahl Industrial company. My goal suffered greatly when the scandal came, but now I have a chance to claim this position after so many years of dedicating my life to it.”

“You can’t. You’re part of the Regulators, Gordan, part of us.” Illis spoke, staring at the nobleman with sad eyes.

“Illis, I knew you would take this hardest of anyone here. Please try to understand that my whole

life was leading to this chance, that the Regulators was my own small means of keeping occupied while I could not get ahead under my family name.”

“But... Gordan, you can’t...” The dark clothed woman sputtered, emotions seeping into her voice.

“Know this, I say, that I will go and hunt down the traitor Claire myself. Her deeds shall not go unpunished.”

Gerick stood up with a cough. “Gordan, are you sure about this?”

“Absolutely, old friend.”

“Then...” He began, voice unsure. He gathered himself up, then put his hand against his forehead in a stiff military salute “Gordan Fulmen, it has been a pleasure ’ta have you fight alongside me as a fellow Regulator. You’ll be missed.”

Gordan smiled, then copied the gesture. “I will treasure my time with you eternally, old friend.”

“Wait... wait a moment!” Fedrich gaped. “Gerick, aren’t we going to chase her down?”

The bearded man shook his head. “It’s no longer our problem, Fedrich, it’s Gordan’s to deal with, and

he's got the help of local guards and his family's men as well."

Fedrich's expression fell. "But... what about all our talk before? I thought you were going with us, too!"

"I don't recall agreeing to that." He spoke evenly.

Fedrich gripped the table tightly, his expression shifting from confusion to anger. Growling, he stood up and glared at him with his pale green eyes. "I'm going to go hunt her, Gerick, she hurt me as badly as she did Gordan."

"Fedrich, I jest said that it's not our problem 'ta worry about!"

"It is my problem! I haven't been able to sleep well or even think clearly because of her! Ever since that moment, I've been tearing myself apart to understand why she did it. She lied to me, betrayed me... and I want to know why!"

"Fedrich, calm down, please." Gerick insisted, waving the Burman off. "You're soundin' as flustered as Illis was that night."

"And she was right to be angry!" The Burman pressed. "I can't let this go, I have to find my

answers or I'll go mad with the want to know!"

"Fedrich..."

"I've got the money to pay for this. I can hunt monsters there just as good as I do here, earn my board and keep. I won't need help from anyone, I can do this myself."

"Come off it, Fedrich!" Gerick begged, anger again edging into his voice. "You've got yer place here in the Regulators 'ta think of."

"You won't reconsider?"

Gerick crossed his arms.

"I'll quit, then." He pressed, stunning the others who had remained silent as they watched the verbal fight progress.

"Now you're bein' unreasonable." Gerick sighed.

"No, I *have* to do this, Gerick!" Fedrich pressed, leaning down to stare at the table. "I don't know what it is, but something about this whole thing has me on edge. I'll never be able to move on unless I find out the answers to my questions."

Gerick stared at the Burman for a long moment, then chuckled. "To think, you came 'ta me without

knowin' a thing about being a warrior. You've grown, Fedrich, stronger than I thought."

"Then?..."

"If you want 'ta go, I won't hold it against you."

Fedrich bowed lightly. "Thank you."

The Burman left the main room and went into his room down the hallway. After a quick minute, he came out from his room decked in travel clothing and his large pack across his shoulders. Glancing to everyone around, he forced a smile.

"Everyone... I will return once my answers are found. Wish me luck." Fedrich spoke, taking quick stride and leaving the Hall behind.

* ^ * ^ *

The Author Speaks!

Alright everyone, gather 'round and get ready for a talk with 'ol uncle Sol. One of the reviewers, tereterhomdark2003, raised a good question in regards to the beginning chapters of this story, so I figured I would only be fair to let everyone know my thoughts on it.

Originally I wrote this story with the intent that the characters in the story would have a role to play in the actual events of the game. Whether or not it would go so far as to having them interact with the game's characters is something I didn't plan yet, I just knew they would change how the game ran along at first. However, as I've been writing this story out, I've become far too attached to the plots I've been working on, and I don't think I want to mix them into the plot of the game. As it stands now, even if I were to continue with that original idea, it would be so far into the future that I doubt it would fit in with the rest of my original work.

So, tereterhomdark2003, I have you to thank for forcing the issue on me instead of letting it go unspoken of. If you want, you could leave an email or IM name so we could talk more about it. Perhaps some outside ideas could help me keep the original story idea afloat amidst my current ones.

Until next time, everyone.

Chapter Eleven

This story belongs to me and my creative mind. However, most of the characters, names, and places all belong to their respective companies, so don't yell at me for copyright infringements! *Remember, Italics represent a person's thoughts or the telling of past events.*

Enjoy...

:Faraway Dreams:

Chapter Eleven:

The late afternoon sunlight shone through the patches of open sky lining the ceiling of Lindblum's walls. People walked with a casual pace, the stress of the day's labor sinking into the recesses of the mind as ideas of relaxation took their place. The Airship traffic continued as busy as it was hours earlier, the labor of business never slowing for things like time.

Fedrich, in the middle of it all, strode on with a singular mindset.

I've got little time to waste now. The sooner I can get to Treno, the better my odds are of finding Claire before she disappears into the city. I hope that the guards will be cooperative this time around...

Pulling out the black headband, the Burman stared at the bloodied rose emblem on it's middle with mixed feelings.

Cecil didn't know what this is, but it has to mean something. I hope that someone can tell me if it's supposed to mean something to assassins and thieves...

The Aircab terminal loomed out from the surrounding buildings in the district, and Fedrich pressed ahead with a quick pace to find an Aircab for the Business District, pocketing the cloth. He was well aware that the dangers in Treno would require preparation, potions and antidotes, any medication he could think of. Reaching back to pat the weight of his Gil pouch at the bottom of his travel bag, he figured that his savings over the past few months would be enough to sustain him for long enough. At the moment, he had one destination in

mind that he hadn't seen since he first came to Lindblum.

I hope that I won't have to spend too much money. I remember that Dragoos said he would be glad to help me, maybe he would even give me another discount...

Entering the terminal, Fedrich's ears quickly picked up an announcer calling for passengers to the Business district. Striding through the moderate crowds, he entered the cab and settled down for the short trip to the main street of Lindblum's economical center. The cab flew the trip without concern, dropping off everyone at the terminal to enter the beginnings of the street, vendors and shoppers still rushing up and down the cobblestone. Adjusting his feathered hat, he strode out into the crowds for the Falgar plaza with a determined step.

Claire is powerful... more than anyone else I've ever seen. Her skill is incredible, too. Elric seems like a cripple compared to her, and it took three of us to just slow him down enough to be caught!

Fedrich clenched his teeth and fists in suppressed anger and fear. *Goddess damn it to the deepest hells, how am I going to stop her? She was right, none of us have the power to stop her if she was serious. She*

fought those monsters like it was a simple game, even enjoyed it when they swarmed her! How can I compare to a demon like her!?

The Burman chuckled ironically. “That’s why she’s called the Demon Lance, it seems...”

He looked up at the skyline, noticing the arch of the Fabool marketplace coming up on his walk. The crowds within the open square were thinning out, carts closing up and being rolled aside as merchants turned in for the night. Artificial lights were being opened up on tall posts, yellow light spilling across the darkening settings.

“I hope Dragoos is still open, it’s getting late.” Fedrich mumbled to himself.

“*Fedrich!!*” A shrill call rang out from behind.

Ears cringing at the sharp voice, the Burman turned around to see who had shouted out his name. Stunning him, he saw a familiar figure with red braids trailing in the air running into the marketplace. Fedrich remained still until Ruthy’s body collided with his own, knocking the two back a few steps, her arms encircled around his torso and her head falling into the crook of his neck.

Spectators gave the two a seconds glance, then returned to their tasks.

“Ruthy?” He sputtered, arms holding her body as he steadied them both. “Why are you here?”

“You oaf, I’m here because you are!” She answered loudly.

“Wha-?” Fedrich began, confused.

“You’re going out to catch Claire, and I can’t stay here and let you go alone! You cold get hurt or worse fighting with her!”

“Ruthy...”

“Please, don’t tell me to go back.” She whimpered, her grip lessening. “You’ve always done so much to help me... and now I want to return the favor and help you.”

“But what about the others?” He asked.

“They told me to do what I believed was the right thing to do.” She answered quietly, stepping back from their awkward embrace. “So I left to go with you.”

“*You’re not gonna stop him?*” Cecil asked, eyes wide at his sudden departure.

“If there’s one thing I know about him, it’s that he’ll keep tryin’ when he’s got his mind set on something regardless ‘o what I’d say.” Gerick replied.

“...Even if it’s a hopeless task.” Illis added from her own experience with the Burman’s stubborn attitude.

“Still, he’s just gone and left without any other clues about where Claire could be. I know he’s smarter’n that.” Cecil continued.

Illis chuckled. “Normally he’s level headed, but throw in something that riles him up and he leaves all common sense behind.”

“His actions are still rash and dangerous, though.” Gordan commented, looking to the elder Regulator. “Are you sure you did the right thing, letting him leave for Treno alone?”

Gerick shrugged his shoulders. “If he’s gonna learn ’ta be less impulsive, he’s gotta learn on his own. ’Sides, he’s a good fighter, he’ll hold his own if he gets in any brawls.”

“Feh, that’ll be the day.” Illis snorted, knowing that Fedrich was slow to change. She looked over to her sister, and her expression faltered when she saw

the redhead staring at the door, eyes unwavering.
“Ruthy?”

No response.

“Ruthy?” Illis asked a little louder.

“Huh?”

“Are you okay?”

“I’m... I... I don’t know. I’m worried about Fedrich getting into too much danger looking for Claire.” The redhead answered, voice unsure.

“He’ll be fine.” Gerick assured her with his wide grin.

“But you saw how strong she was! What if he gets hurt because of her, or attacked by thieves, or-!”

“Ruthy, keep calm, now.” Illis pleaded, seeing her sibling growing more frustrated.

“But I can’t, sis! I’ve got this terrible feeling, like something’s going to go wrong, and... I just can’t abandon him to fight Claire alone. He needs my help, I can’t leave him!” She wrapped her arms around herself. “He’s trying to help us all on his own, and I... I just can’t...”

“Ruthy...” Illis cooed, seeing her younger sister writhing with inner turmoil. The situation seemed eerily similar to her own, and she allowed herself a slight grin in the knowledge that she brought it around. She stood up and walked to her side, the others forgotten for the moment, and leaned over to hug her tightly. The redhead returned the embrace, wetness lining her eyes.

“I’m scared...” She sniffed. “That he’ll never—”

“It’s okay, sister.” Illis spoke calmly. Standing back up again, she regarded her younger half with a warm and knowing smile. “Listen, you go and do what your heart tells you is the right thing. You’ll never fail so long as you remember that.”

For a long second, Ruthy sat still, taking in the words. As if pulling a mask off her face, her expression lifted and was replaced with one that held strength and focus. Standing up, she smiled in return to her older sister for the advice.

“You’re right, sis, thanks.”

Fedrich remained silent for a long moment, thinking heavily on the situation. His spur of the moment drive to pursue Claire didn’t let him think about the effect it had on everyone else. Looking at

Ruthy, the redhead holding herself with amber eyes looking at his own, he came to the conclusion that he couldn't refuse her.

"Are you sure you want to do this?" He asked again.

She nodded. "Wherever you go, I'll follow."

"No." He corrected, putting a hand to her shoulder and drawing her forward. "We'll walk side by side, and face this challenge together."

Ruthy's face broke out in a smile at his reassurance, and she leaned in and hugged him once more. "Okay. Let's go."

* * *

"Mr. Dragoos? Are you in?" Fedrich asked, stepping into the weapons shop.

A shuffle of feet at the back gave sign that someone was present, and the towering bulk of the demi-human appeared at the front counter with a wide yawn. He looked at his customer, but hesitated a moment as the gears in his head churned in thoughts.

"Wait a sec..." He began, scratching his face. "I recognize you... the one with the ol' Burmecia

Royal Guard sword, right?”

Fedrich nodded. “The same, Fedrich Castor.”

The man’s face lit up. “Ah yeah, it’s been a long while! ‘ow can I help you?”

“Well, I was thinking on buying some armor for myself for some dangerous work I’ve taken on.”

“Sure, but what kind do you need? I’ve got tons of varieties ’ere.” Dragoos spoke while motioning with his arms to encompass his shop.

Fedrich looked at his vest, the once new and thick material worn down and scarred with the signs of battle. Dragoos picked up on the look in his eyes and grunted.

“Something like a vest, you’re thinkin’?”

Fedrich nodded weakly. “I’m not sure what other armor I’d want, I’ve normally stuck to plain clothes for protection.”

“Well, trust me, there’s an armor for anyone in the world, no matter how picky ’e may be.” The owner grinned. “Come on over, I’ve got vests that’ll work for you fine and well.”

Dragoos walked out from around his front counter, plodding over to a wall that bore a large collection of plate armors, helmets, and shields. Vests made of shimmering and scaly material were displayed in the middle of it all, most the color of steel while others looked reddish or mud colored.

“Now we’ve got some copper vests ‘n a lot of mythril ones as well.” He spoke, motioning to each type. “Those’ll run you about eight hundred for copper, and eleven hundred for mythril. These ones here are somethin’ called gaia vests. Supposedly they’re able ’ta protect you from being hurt by earthen monsters, but I’ve not noticed it much. Those run for about eighteen hundred, pricey but reliable for those who’re into that type.”

Fedrich nodded throughout the explanation, thinking about which one would suit him best. The copper vest was too little for his tastes, and the mythril vest seemed the best of them all, the silvery color close to his fur’s natural shade. The gaia vest looked like his own, smooth and a color like the earth, but it’s price made him think otherwise.

“I’ll try the mythril vest.”

“Alright.” He took the vest off its peg and passed it to the Burman.

Fedrich removed his travel pack and sword belt, then slung the mythril vest over his old one and shifted it around to feel how it rested on him. The armored vest looked like a normal one, but the presence of glimmering mythril threads in the weave caught his eye, and the thicker and heavier weight also proved it's name.

"How do you take to it? It's a good buy for those get into fights, looks like a normal vest 'cept up close."

"It's nice... light and flexible, I'll take it."

"Right then, it'll be eleven hundred Gil."

Fedrich got down and unstrung his travel pack, then reached through it and pulled the heavy sack of Gil from the bottom. He pulled out a handful of coins, sliding them back in until he had the proper amount left in his hand. Giving them to Dragoos, he sealed the pouch and put it on top of the pack.

"Thanks for the purchase."

"You're welcome." Fedrich nodded. "Do you... think I need any other kinds of armor?"

"Depends. 'Ow much trouble are you expectin'?"

Fedrich thought for a moment, then decided to trust the fellow demi-human with a bit of the truth. “I’m going to be hunting down someone who betrayed me a while back. She’s strong... and if it comes to a fight, I don’t want to go in without something to even the field.”

“Well then,” Dragoos muttered, crossing his massive arms in thought. “I suppose for a Burman like yourself, you’d want to be free and agile, not weighed down, right?”

“Yes.”

“...Then I’d recommend some wraps for yer feet, first off, and maybe your arms as well.” He nodded, walking to another section of the store that held a large, wooden cabinet. “The keen thing about you Burmans is that you’ve excelled at makin’ armor that’s flexible as string but tough as stone.” He pulled out a long length of thin leather material and tugged it, letting it snap and show strength. “This is simple tanned leather, except it was made in Burmecia and has a lotta mythril sewn into it. Most of your soldiers use it ’ta cover their feet and hands, although I’ve seen some of ’em cover most of their bodies with it.”

“How much is it?”

“It goes about three hundred a length of it, so two for yer legs and two for yer hands if you like.”

Fedrich stooped down again and checked his bag of Gil. It was still full of coins, but he wasn’t sure how much he should spend here and save for the trip and stay in Treno.

“I’ll... take two for my feet.” He spoke, pulling out the six hundred Gil.

“Okay then, catch.” Dragoos tossed two lengths of the wrap to Fedrich, their forms heavier than he thought.

Fedrich stood and gave the other six hundred to Dragoos, the boar grunting his thanks.

“Fedrich, do you think I need anything?” Ruthy asked, silent as she watched the two converse with one another.

“I dunno. It’d probably be better if you had some armor.”

“You’re an archer, right?” Dragoos interrupted.

“Y-Yes.” Ruthy answered, intimidated by the demi-human’s large bulk.

“I’ve got just the thing you’d like, missy, just you wait.” He spoke quickly, pleased. Walking to his counter, he rooted beneath it and pulled out two large gloves. They hit the table with a clink of metal. “Plated gloves, miss. Softest leather on the inside and out with tiny metal plates between the joints. Nothin’ would be able to hurt your hands in a fight, so you can string up even after getting yer fingers gnawed on.”

“How much to they cost?” She asked.

“Five hundred flat. It’s a good honest deal, they’re normally a lot more ’cause of all the work in ’em, but I’ve got connections to the man who makes them.”

She grinned, reaching for her own Gil. “Okay, sounds worthwhile.”

“I’ll buy them for you, Ruthy.” Fedrich insisted.

“You don’t have to.”

“I do, though!”

“You really don’t need to Fedrich. I’ve still got a lot left over from that dragon, remember?” She said with a finalizing tone.

Fedrich accepted defeat with a nod, and Ruthy pulled the coins out to pay for them. After passing the coins to the owner, she pulled her own gloves off and donned the mailed ones. Sliding them over her fingers gently, she flexed them and rotated her wrists, finding that they offered little resistance. Reaching back, she pulled her longbow free and readied an arrow, satisfied that the gloves didn't interfere with her trade.

"You like them, eh?" Dragoos questioned.

"Very much, thanks." She nodded.

"Ah, it's not a problem." He hummed approvingly. "Anythin' else I can help you with?"

"No, I think we're set." Fedrich looked over to Ruthy, who nodded in agreement.

"Alright then, you two have a fine evening and stay healthy!" Dragoos waved as the two walked out of the shop.

The later afternoon sunlight was already fading into nighttime, the crowds of people thinned out to a meager collection of patrons at shops and eateries. The skies were alit with pink and red clouds, illuminated by the trailing edge of the sun that rested on the ocean's back.

“Is there anything else we need?”

“Medicine, for certain.” Fedrich mentioned, pointing a clawed finger to another building. “There’s a shop with them and other things right there.”

The two walked across the small plaza, past the fountain with rushing water running along it’s sides and collecting at a pool near the bottom. Once across, they stepped into the stoop to the shop and looked inside. Darkness was past the windows, and the door was secured after trying to open it.

“Damn.” Fedrich swore.

“Do we really need to buy anything? I’ve still got potions and antidotes with me.” Ruthy prodded.

“So do I, but I’d rather be overstocked than short of them.”

“True...” She mused.

“I suppose there’s little else to do except get a room for the night.” Fedrich huffed, walking away from the shop.

“Why get a room? We can still go back to our homes with everyone else.” Ruthy asked with a start, catching up to the Burman.

Fedrich sighed, lowering his head. “Honestly, I don’t want to face them. I... want to get this over with soon, seeing them again and being reminded of what I’m leaving would only make me torn over going or not.”

Ruthy remained silent as she listened. She figured Fedrich was dead set on finding Claire, but hearing the hesitation in his voice made her reconsider that fact. What else could he be concerned with beyond getting to the truth?

“You understand what I mean, don’t you?” He questioned, glancing her way.

“I think so...” She replied, unsure.

The two didn’t speak as they entered the nearly abandoned Fabool marketplace. All the vendors had taken their wares and carts and turned in for the evening, exhausted over a hard day of pushing their products. A few of the nighttime businesses were opening up, many of them with less desirable materials and some of questionable morals. The night was when the less savory part of Lindblum woke, offering passerbys a chance to indulge in sinful delights.

“Where are we going?” Ruthy asked after a long number of minutes passed.

“There’s an Inn called Lavilero’s on the main street. We should be able to get a room there or somewhere else.” He informed with a quiet voice.

“Okay.” She whispered back, voice low as his was.

Several minutes later, after walking through the awakening nighttime business on the main street of the district, they came upon Lavilero’s Inn, sign illuminated with a blue tinted light. Stepping inside, Fedrich was mildly surprised to see a small man with a cap across his head at the desk instead of the eternally reading man during his last visit.

“Welcome!” The worker greeted in a chipper voice. “How can I be of help?”

“I— We need two rooms for the night.”

“Any services or the like?”

“Just something to sleep on, nothing special, thanks.”

“Alright, the total comes to one hundred sixty for the both of you.” The man noted, accepting the Gil Fedrich passed to him and storing it below the

counter. “You’ll have rooms nine and ten, back of the second floor.”

“Thank you.” Fedrich said while accepting the two keys.

“Have a pleasant stay!” The man added as the two walked up the staircase.

“You gonna turn in now?” Ruthy asked, keeping pace as they walked to the end of the wooden corridor.

“Yeah... we’ll be leaving early tomorrow, so I’ll be getting as much sleep as I can.” Fedrich yawned, unlocking the door to his room. “...Not to mention that I’ve been tired most of today, I couldn’t get much sleep as of late...”

Ruthy opened her door and tossed her pack and longbow into the small room, then looked back to Fedrich. “I’m going to get something to eat, care to come?”

“No thanks.”

Ruthy’s expression fell, but she forced a grin and closed her door. “Okay then, goodnight.”

“G’night.” Fedrich nodded, opening his door and stepping inside.

Closing the door and locking it, Fedrich walked over to the bed and dropped his pack at its side, setting the sword next to it. He removed his vest and work pants, draping them over a small chair before tossing his feathered hat onto the dresser. He then pulled the thin covers of the bed open and walked to the lamp, closing its doors to darken the room except for a muted glow in the cracks of the block. Sliding into the bed, he rested his head on the pillow and let the day's wear and tear pull him into an uneasy sleep. The blurry visions in his dreaming eye all reminded him of Claire.

* * *

A knock on the door immediately caught the attention of powerful ears, and Fedrich's consciousness wasn't far behind. Opening his eyes slowly, he took a moment to let his body wake up completely before rising from the bed. Plodding to the door quietly, he turned the key placed in the lock and opened it up to reveal his redheaded companion.

"Good morning, Fed—" Ruthy trailed off, a blush rising to her face and she looked away.

"Morning...?" He replied, curious about why her face was red. Brain clicking a second later, he looked at himself and saw he was only dressed in a

thin loincloth. Closing the door, he rushed to his bed and immediately donned his pants and vest, a similar blush spreading along his face. Being awake certainly didn't mean his mind was also. After making himself decent, he opened the door again and rubbed his head.

"Sorry." He apologized.

"It's alright."

"What time is it? Is it morning already?" He pondered.

Ruthy pulled out her pocketwatch and brought it to Fedrich's face. "It's already eight. Didn't you want to leave early?"

Fedrich laughed, embarrassed to have slept in so late. "I guess that plan's shot down." Shoving his hair back, he walked into the room and began to pick up his things. "Still, it doesn't mean we can't strike out now and try to make up some lost time."

"One step ahead of you." Ruthy shrugged her pack securely onto her back.

"...Now that we're on the same page," The Burman commented, pulling his hat onto his head

and slinging the scabbard of his short sword over his shoulder. “Let’s head out.”

Closing the door, the two walked down the staircase and returned the keys to their rooms to the same worker. Stepping out into the thickening morning crowds, Fedrich and Ruthy quickly made his way to the Hunter’s Gate and into the open air of the plains. Skipping down numerous flights of stairs, the two made a slight detour along the path once getting to the bottom.

“Where are we going, exactly?” Ruthy asked.

“To rent some chocobos for the trip.” Fedrich answered plainly.

“Chocobos? You mean we’re going by land?”

“Yeah. Tickets for an Airship are too far out of my range, and we need to save what money we can.”

“But won’t that take too long?”

“I don’t think so. Back home I rode a chocobo once or twice, and they can move quite fast when they need to.” Fedrich glanced out to the sky, checking the position of the sun. “Hopefully we can cross the Euronus Plains to the Byan Plateau today, rest for a night, then cross the Cebeel river tomorrow

and push for South Gate by nightfall. After that, we'll be able to reach Treno by mid-afternoon."

"What about camping out in the wilds? There are monsters there, you know."

"The chocobo stalls should have equipment to use for that, if not, we can always go back and buy the proper material."

Ruthy gave her friend a strange look. "How long have you been planning this?"

"Since Claire ran off." He replied.

Ruthy arched an eyebrow in surprise. She understood that Fedrich was determined to find Claire and settle his score with her, but she didn't think he had made any preparations as serious as these. His calmer attitude about the situation made her curious, that he might not be as obsessed with her as she thought.

I hope to heaven he won't lose it when he finds her...

Chapter Twelve

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Enjoy...

:Faraway Dreams:

Chapter Twelve:

“How much progress do you think we’ve made!?” Ruthy shouted over the din of passing wind.

“We crossed the Cebeel an hour ago, so we should be getting close to the Aerbs’ foothills!” Fedrich replied, checking his compass needle. “If we keep pushing northeast, eventually we’ll meet with the Cebeel again, and that’ll lead right to the South Gate roadway!”

“Alright!” Ruthy shouted.

“Let’s kick up the pace, we’ve still got a lot of land to cover by nightfall!” Fedrich suggested, thumping the chocobo’s side with his feet to prod it onward.

The chocobo warked at the action, but quickened its pace regardless. The ground sped by rapidly, each footfall covering almost three meters distance as the two birds sped their way across the King Ed plains. Thick patches of reeds and grass sprouted up from the ground, an occasional rise or fall in the landscape, but little else was present to hinder the view of the horizon. Far off in the misty distance, the tips of the Aerbs mountain range rose above the barriers of land, giving the two Regulators hope that their journey was coming to a close. The sun was climbing up to the top of the sky, clouds from the ocean lazily drifting inland with the steady breeze that coursed over the plains.

“We might need to rest soon!” Ruthy called out. “Pluck here is looking tired!”

Fedrich looked back at the aforementioned chocobo and saw that it’s head was drooping a little, eyes barely focused on the ground ahead. Checking

his own bird, he saw that it too was keeping its head low from being pushed as it was.

“Okay!” He agreed. “We’ll take a break at the top of that rise ahead!”

“Gotcha!”

Fedrich wasn’t surprised that the birds were getting tired. Having lost time the previous day, he continued riding to the Byan Plateau even past nightfall, coming to a suitable clearing only when it was near midnight. Rising at dawn to continue the trek, even he was feeling fatigue pulling on his mind and body. Suddenly both chocobo’s skidded to a halt, both of them now alert and with heads raised in the air, tail feathers twitching.

“Hey, why’d you stop?” Ruthy asked her bird.

“Come on, just a little more and we can rest.” Fedrich prompted his bird, kicking its side to get it moving.

The chocobo warked in protest, feet stamping on the grass as it held put. Another squawk came from beyond the rise in the land, and the chocobo backed up further. From over the rise in the landscape, a white-feathered chocobo bounded up and raced past the two Regulators, warking loudly as it fled.

Fedrich reigned in his mount as it bucked in panic, then looked around the area in confusion and curiosity.

“What was that?” He pondered.

“That choc had a saddle and packs.” Ruthy observed. “Maybe he got away from a traveler?”

“Maybe... let’s press on.” The Burman decided.

The two continued their treck across the flats, passing to the top of the rise to see a gruesome sight. Scattered around the area were nearly a dozen chocobos and a similar number of travelers, all dead. Monsters, a few Vices with bloodied daggers and swords, were quickly rooting through packs for food and valuables as others fought with two remaining humans.

“Gods no.” Ruthy paled.

“Let’s go, quickly!” Fedrich ordered, jumping off his mount and drawing his sword.

Ruthy reached out and grabbed the other chocobos reigns to keep it from running, then slung her longbow free and readied an arrow. Firing the projectile, it whistled through the air and caught a vice in the shoulder, flinging the monsters down.

Quickly pulling another ready, she finished it off as Fedrich cut down yet another. Looking around for other targets, she gasped as the last vice cut down one of the two humans.

“No!!” Fedrich cried in vain, watching the Vice impale one of the last standing warriors. He rushed forwards, sword ready to kill the murderous monster before it could turn its blade on the last standing traveler, a slight woman in red attire. He hesitated, though, as the woman suddenly brought her hands together and chanted, sparkling light dancing on her fingers.

“Blindness!” She shouted, the energy shooting out and engulfing the Vice’s head in a thick shroud of black mist.

The monsters stopped suddenly and growled, chittering as it spun around in confusion at its lack of vision. The woman knelt and picked up a wooden staff, then rushed forward and attacked. Her blows did little harm to the monster, sending it stumbling side to side, eventually knocking its sword loose from broken digits, but little else. Fedrich, close enough, jumped up and used the added momentum to cut through the Vice’s back and end its life. The

woman, enraged still, continued to swing her weapon, forcing the Burman to block the staff.

“Miss, stop!” He pleaded. “The monsters are all dead, you’re safe now!”

After a moment she did as he asked, holding the staff protectively as she looked at the Burman. Adrenaline and fear fading away, tears broke out in her eyes and she slid to the ground, crying loudly. Fedrich stood still, feeling strange as he watched her weep, barely noticing Ruthy’s arrival to the scene. The redhead hopped down from her chocobo, then knelt down a close space from the older woman.

“Miss? Are you hurt at all? I can help you if you are.” Ruthy cooed in a gentle tone.

“I’m... I’m fine.” The elder woman answered, sniffing. “But the others...”

“It doesn’t look like anyone else survived.” Fedrich commented.

Ruthy glared back at him with an angry look, causing the Burman to close his mouth. Apparently, he figured, the situation needed a more womanly approach.

Ruthy looked back at the elderly traveler, inspecting her appearance. Her knee length traveling dress was dirty and speckled with blood and cuts, but nothing too serious. The gold bodice that fit her torso was intact mostly, but the circular red fabric that went around her shoulders was torn nearly in half. Red gloves and red boots, each adorned with a purple ribbon, were covered in mud and blood, but none of it seemed to be hers.

“Who are you?” The traveler asked meekly.

Ruthy smiled warmly. “My name’s Ruthy, and my friend is Fedrich. We were traveling through here when we came on this. What happened to you?”

“We had just gotten on the road after a break... and these monsters just came out of nowhere and started going for the chocs.” The woman explained in an even, worldly tone. “We tried to stop them, but they turned on us, and...”

“It’s okay.” Ruthy interrupted. “I know.”

“I’m sorry, I haven’t introduced myself.” The woman spoke, standing and brushing loose dirt from her clothes. “I’m Leena Doreen, a Red Mage of Mysidia.”

“Well, it’s nice to meet you, Miss Doreen.” Ruthy nodded.

The red mage shook herself up to get her limbs working, dark brown hair falling in her face. She stooped over and picked up a wide brimmed hat with beads decorating the edges, placing it on her head to pin loose locks of hair still.

“This is horrid.” Leena muttered, looking around the field. “I’d be lucky to find a scrap of anything here.”

“What were you doing out here?” Fedrich asked, watching the mage pace to an overturned cart.

The woman didn’t respond, but leaned inside the splintered hulk and looked around, gingerly stepping onto the frame and going inside. A few seconds later a mournful cry leapt from the cart, drawing both Fedrich and Ruthy to its entrance.

“What’s wrong!?” Ruthy asked immediately.

“The books! They’ve all been ruined, stolen!” The mage exclaimed, looking at empty shelves and boxes. “This is terrible. No no no... there has to be something left!”

Leena knelt down in the rubble of the cart and sifted through broken wood and crates, whimpering as desperate eyes hoped to find even one book intact. Ruthy looked inside, hoping to find a book left, but couldn't see any that weren't cut apart or torn to ruin.

"Damn them ten times over, the bastards." Leena swore, sinking to the bottom of the cart to sit in shock.

"What were in those books?" Ruthy asked after a long minute.

"...Materials on the study of magic, historical tomes about long past cultures and nations, a lot of different series on the study of mythical beasts and the lore of ancient mages. We were going to Alexandria to donate these to the Queen's personal library as a gift for her support of our cities on Dagurerro... but this happened."

"I'm sorry we couldn't help you stop them soon enough." Ruthy apologized.

"It's fine, you had no way of knowing." Leena waved it off, standing up and leaving the cart. 'What to do... fuck, what am I supposed to do now!?' Wiping her eyes of fresh tears, she looked around at

the bodies of her traveling companions. “I... guess I’ll have to go it alone...”

“No you don’t, we can help you!” Ruthy chirped.

“You... would?” Leena asked, surprised.

“Of course, we can’t just leave you here like this.” Fedrich added with a grin. “All this blood will attract other monsters soon. We’ll have to pack what you need and go quickly.”

“But my choc ran off once they attacked...”

“Hey, that must have been Leena’s chocobo we saw earlier!” Ruthy declared.

“No, there he is!” Leena pointed to the bird, standing carefully on the rise. “Polom, you coward! Get your pansy hide over here before I pluck your feathers out!”

The bird strode over to her master, almost looking annoyed with Leena’s belittling words. However, she stepped up and hugged his neck and stroked its feathers.

“Good thing you are a coward, else you’d be bloodied and dead like the rest, eh?”

The bird warked, and she laughed slightly, looking back to the two Regulators. “Alright, let’s check the other packs and see if there’s anything left to take.”

Ruthy and Fedrich nodded their agreement, walking to the bodies of the fallen to search for anything useful. Leena was slowly progressing to each body, whispering words of condolences and prayers as she tried to clean them up properly. After working for several long minutes, the three shoved the gathered goods into whatever spare room their packs had and mounted their rides. Leena sighed painfully, looking around the field.

“I wish I could give them a proper burial.” She sulked.

“So do I, but it isn’t safe to stay here.” Fedrich repeated his warnings. “We should go.”

“Alright.” She nodded, prodding her chocobo to movement while casting a backwards glance one last time. “The blessings of the Gods be with you all, friends.”

The nighttime air swirled with aimless direction, the close proximity of the mountains making the currents uneasy as cold air met warm. Trees swayed

and creaked as the breezes caressed their tall branches, the occasional twig falling onto the needle strewn ground.

“Soup’s done.” Ruthy announced, the other two travelers scooting next to the small fire.

Shadows danced along the nearby conifers as they all ate the meal in heavy silence, the perpetual wind and the occasional chirp from a sleeping chocobo all that was heard. Fedrich set his small tin bowl on his pack and yawned heavily, the mounting stress of the trip weighting on his waking mind.

“That was delicious, Ruthy.” He praised.

“A little thin for me, but we’ve got to stretch our food supply as it is. Thanks.” She grinned, looking back at Leena, who was at the edge of the clearing.
“You okay, Leena? Care for some more?”

“No, but thank you anyway.” She replied quietly.

Fedrich looked at the sullen red mage with a somber feeling, wondering if the woman would ever recover from the shock of the battle that claimed her friends. Despite his own meager efforts to comfort her, she was still unable to come around, even Ruthy’s sometimes infectious humor doing little to raise the spirits of the trio.

“You think she’ll be okay?” Fedrich whispered to his redhead friend.

“She’s suffered a lot today... I don’t know if she will ever be okay.” Ruthy sighed. “She’s being a lot calmer than I imagined someone would be in this situation.”

“I guess so...”

Silence pressed on them for a long minute, the two considering their thoughts on the change in their plans.

Ruthy finally broke the quiet. “What are we going to do now?”

“Hmm?”

“Leena.” She clarified. “We just can’t leave her alone at a time like this, and she needs to get to Alexandria.”

Fedrich heaved a sigh. “We’ll just part ways at South Gate, we don’t have enough time to go there and back.”

“I don’t think we should let her go alone, though.”

“What can we do, then? If she was going to meet with the Queen of Alexandria, then there must be someone she knows in the castle. She’s old enough to take care of her own affairs, we don’t need to babysit her forever.”

The red mage stirred from her spot, silencing both travelers.

“You don’t need to be overly considerate, I know that you’ve got important things to take care of.” She deposited herself next to the fire and readied her bed. “Taking me to South Gate is more than enough help, I can manage on my own wits.”

“But it’s still dangerous to travel alone!” Ruthy blurted out.

“I’m aware of that. Polom there can run quick enough, I should be fine.” Leena insisted. “Besides, I can tell that the both of you are in a rush, so I wouldn’t want to impose.”

“It’s no problem, none at all!”

The red mage chuckled lightly. “You’re too kind, but I’ll be going once we hit South Gate. Your friend there said that you don’t have time to waste, so I don’t wish to hold you up.”

Ruthy tried to go on, but her voice refused to work, leaving her flustered. Fedrich stood up and stretched his arms, scanning the horizon before picking up the sheath to his sword.

“I’ll take first watch, so you both best get some sleep.” He looked towards Leena. “I’m sorry we can’t help you more than this, but...”

She nodded. “I understand, I’m a stickler for schedules myself.”

“...Thank you.” He offered a weak grin.
“Goodnight.”

* * *

Clouds sat in mute observation of the mountains, hugging to the steep faces and providing moderate shelter from the late morning sun to weary travelers below. Cutting through a layer of such clouds, an Airship pushed towards a massive, artificial barrier set into a natural valley of the mountain range. A circular barrier in the center of the wall split down the middle and slid into the sides, granting access to the flying craft. Below, a similar stream of travelers walked though the misty trails leading to the base of the gate, a large plaza awaiting them. Among them

trotted a trio of chocobos in full gear, making fast time to the entrance at the end of the roadway.

“Almost there!” Ruthy cheered.

“Good time at that, we might make Treno before the sun’s out.” Fedrich added.

“You’re going to the sleepless city?” Leena asked from behind the two.

“Yeah!” Ruthy answered quickly.

Leena’s face lit up for the first time since they met, a welcome sight for both Regulators. “Praise be to Leviathan, I’m going by there on the way to the capitol!”

“Then it seems we’ll still be able to help you on your trip there.” Fedrich grinned.

The three travelers pressed through the swelling number of crowds, quickly moving towards specifically designed trails for the large birds. Strong legs propelling them up steep inclines and tunnels, they emerged into Alexandrian territory near the apex of South Gate.

“We ought to stop a while and let the chocs rest up.” Leena suggested with a knowing expression. “We’ve pressed them hard, plus we need to resupply

for the rest of the trip. Things are too expensive in Treno to be worth investing in, I've heard."

"I can attest to that." Ruthy called, slowing her bird down. "The summit station has a market, we can stop there."

"More of that bundt cake, too." Fedrich smirked, stomach recalling the sweet texture.

The three rode on until coming to a stall for the birds to rest at. Securing their packs and the reigns, they emptied healthy portions of greens for the birds to eat as well as buckets of water. Pacing along with the majority of other travelers, they entered the summit station and the plethora of carts and merchant stands.

"Okay, I'll definitely need to get extra rations of jerky and dried fruits..." Leena rattled off absently. "Nuts, too. Water, flatbread... fish?"

"I don't think they have that." Fedrich chuckled. "They've got some tasty sweetbread, though."

"Eh, none for me, thanks. Sweets rot your innards, they say."

"They must be lunatics, it's heavenly stuff." He jested.

“Each man to his own.” Leena toned. “We can reconvene at our birds in an hours time, I can take care of business and see about getting a message back to Mysidia.”

“Okay then, see you later!” Ruthy chimed in as the red mage moved into the thick of the crowds.

“Right, let’s get going. You know what we need, Ruthy?”

She nodded. “Yes, we can get anything else you want as soon as we’re done with what’s necessary. First off is water, then we need more bread and fresh fruits and vegetables...”

“We really don’t need to buy that much here, Treno is just a half day away.”

“Still, better to prepare while you can.” The redhead insisted.

Fedrich nodded his understanding, but quietly protested having to wait to get the sweetbread he desired. Walking through the crowds of the summit station was a refreshing change of pace, again surrounded by humanity after two days of solitary travel on the open plains. Wandering from cart to cart, the two Regulators slowly amassed the foods they needed until Fedrich’s arms were nearly

overflowing with edibles. Buying a cheap pack to hold the foods, Fedrich them happily strode off and bought a large share of bundt cake to sate his sweet tooth. Although relishing the time to relax, the two slowly walked back to the posts where their birds rested and saw Leena patiently writing in a small book.

“A message for home?” Ruthy asked.

“Nope, journal entry for the day. It helps me to relax whenever I’ve had a rough time.”

“Some bundt cake to help?” Fedrich offered as a polite gesture.

“Again, no thanks.”

“Alright then, more for me!” He grinned.

“You’re more than welcome to it.” Leena remarked with a sarcastic drawl. “I assume you both got everything you need?”

“Yes.” Ruthy took her temporary pack and slung it onto her bird. “And you?”

“The same.” She stretched. “Let’s get going them and cover the rest before nightfall.”

The trio mounted their birds after loosening the knots on their reigns, then prodded them into motion taking them down the Alexandrian side of the Aerbs. Taking the switchback trails with a quick pace, they descended down a basin close to the Berkmea cable cars and made for the Treno gate. Showing the guards the appropriate papers, they passed through and entered the long stretch of plains on the Bentini flats. The sun slowly drifted down the sky as they progressed across the featureless fields, slowly changing into a false moon as they entered the Gaia Shroud. As a pocketwatch revealed it to be a little past nine 'o clock, the brilliant lights of Treno appeared on the horizon, signaling the end to their trip.

* ^ * ^ *

The Author Speaks!

Grumbles My thumb's all sore, although I suppose you'd not care to hear me complain about that. On a note that you would be concerned with, I've got some more news about the story, some good, some bad.

Good news: I've been going on a spree of playing historian within the realm of the Mist Continent, and have written up a few documents about it's past.

Adding that into some massive updates to the transportation section of the database, plus some more characters, it looks like next chapter update will see the unveiling of the information database 2.0!

Bad news: My parents are moving to Washington state come the middle of June. I, being a simple college student with a part time job, have no means to staying down here in sunny southern California, so I'll be shipping up north with them. What this means for you all is that I might not be able to sit down and work on this story for a good month, definitely something I wish I could avoid. I should be able to churn out a few more chapters between then and now, so I'll be sure to post a reminder about it and possible dates of when I'll be back online.

Bleh, I'll see you all next time. Peace 'n love, readers.

Chapter Thirteen

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Enjoy...

:Faraway Dreams:

Chapter Thirteen:

The early afternoon sunlight gave the Treno streets an ample amount of moonlight to see by, the mysterious Gaia Shroud making the land a permanent moonscape. Within the streets of the least reputable regions of the city lurked a thriving thieves market, a place where any goods could be purchased for the right price. Although the nobles of Treno prided themselves on their classy standards, they turned a blind eye when it came to the festering criminal underworld beneath their manors. As such,

the city guard rarely walked down the grimy paths, producing new generations of miscreants who walked in the open without any fear of arrest or capture. Pickpockets mingled with murderers, creating a microcosm of social interaction in the place once called the Rook's Circle. Now the citizens and locals simply called it Cutthroat circle.

The afternoon hours were as busy here as anywhere else. People walked in solitude or in groups to businesses and eateries, harlot's vied for the attention of willing men, and scuffles occurred here and there that ended in wounded pride, stolen Gil, or dead bodies. One particular figure strode over to the door of a bar with an arrogant step, lifted a clawed foot, and knocked the barrier off it's hinges with a loud crack of her heel.

"Knock knock, Joachim! You here!?" Claire announced as she stepped inside over the broken door.

"By whatever gods exist, woman, that the forth time you've ruined a perfectly good door." A cultured voice complained from deep within the bar. "Is it beyond you to simply open it like everyone else?"

Claire barked a laugh as she strode over to the bar proper, pushing past a few stunned patrons to the owner of the establishment. Sitting on an uneven stool, she leaned over and placed herself close to the man dressed in fine clothing. The man swirled around a healthy dose of red wine in his glass snifter, taking a sip while staring at her with neutral gray eyes. Setting it on the bar, he shifted his posture and crossed his arms.

“Must you?” His eyes motioned to their proximity.

“Yes, and only because it annoys you.” The Burman smirked.

Joachim sighed, then stood up and straightened his slacks. “Let’s take this to the back.”

Claire stood and followed the man as he walked behind the bar and to a door set into a corner. Pulling out a key, he unlocked its deadbolt and swung it open, motioning for the lady to enter first. Claire took advantage of his chivalry and entered the private chamber, flopping casually onto a maroon couch as he closed the door and made sure it was secure. Walking to a high backed chair, he sat down slowly and turned it to face the woman.

“I’d hoped you would have been back earlier than this.” He reprimanded.

“Hopes are for the foolish, I got my job done.” She countered in a rough tone.

“And your partner, Riyu Genji?”

“Dead, to my benefit. He let his guard down and paid for it with a broadsword in his gut.”

Joachim clucked his tongue. “Tragic, and here I’d hoped that he would return and be willing to work solely under my orders.”

“He was blind and too prideful, I can do just as good for you!”

The man snorted. “Frankly, Clariza Severspear, you annoy me far too much to even consider it.”

“Tell me, then, what is better? Better to have an obedient failure or a rebellious success?” Claire posed, reaching into her pocket for a moment. “I can provide many reasons to keep me on your tab, starting with this.”

She pulled out two gold rings, one of plain manufacture and the other inlaid with precious gems that glittering in the dim lamplight. Joachim leaned forward and plucked the ornaments from her

palm, eyeing them intensely. After a long few seconds, a smile lifted his expression and he placed the rings next to the lamp to further their sparkling.

“So... he’s finally dead.”

“You mind telling me why you wanted to off the old man? He did something to offend you?”

Joachim chuckled, placing the rings in his shirt pocket. “That is why I would prefer Riyu to the likes of you, Claire. He had intuition, could ascertain things that would go unspoken.”

“What do you mean?” She prodded, sitting upright and leaning close.

“Take a look at me, woman, and pay attention to the details! Certainly even you could see the likeness between Setzer Gestahl and myself.”

Claire looked intently at the man’s face for a long moment, he even turned his head side to side to humor her. After many seconds, her face lit up, and she fell back into the couch with a knowing laugh.

“So you’re his bastard son, then? That’s rich, a misbegotten son who never got to relish his parent’s wealth!”

Joachim smiled as well. “Even still you don’t get it.”

Claire stopped laughing, and her expression hardened in a moments time as she stared at the man. Joachim idly smoothed his shirt and leaned into his chair casually.

“Setzer is not my father. Edward Gestahl, the man who died and left the entire Gestahl Industry to the eldest heir of the family line, the one who refused to accept any outside influence from any man, the single most worshipped philanthropist of Treno’s entire history, holds that title.”

“Lie.” She decided.

“Truth.” Joachim countered. “Like Setzer Gestahl, so too was Edward a promiscuous ladies man in his youthful age. My mother was a book keeper for the business’ finances, and Edward was more than willing to give her ‘favors’ during her off hours. Once mother discovered she was pregnant, she demanded to be a part of the family line and therefore be wed to him and given place as an heir to the vast money she oversaw. Edward, engaged a few days before knowing, fired her on account of inaccurate bookkeeping and made certain that she could never testify against him. She couldn’t get a

job anywhere in Treno, and after giving birth to me, was forced into poverty to keep me alive.”

The man stood up and sighed in deep thought. “Her obsessive quest to gain revenge permeated my life, and now you are witness to it’s ending. With these rings in my possession, I have the rightful claim to the business that she and I were rightfully entitled to!”

Claire stood up and cracked her neck. “Lovely story, I feel so much at ease, now. Do you have my payment?”

The man nodded, reaching into his coat pocket and pulling out a velvet pouch. He presented it to her, and she grabbed it and checked within. Coins of large denominations rested within, along with a plethora of other valuable gems and ores. She snickered and dropped the pouch into a large leather sack on her hip, grinning wickedly.

“It has been a unique experience, Clariza.” Joachim stated, offering a hand.

“The same to you.” She replied while accepting the shake.

The man opened the door to the bar and allowed Claire to exit first again, the Burman woman nearly

skipping with pride and giddiness. Her eyes looked across the space, and her smile widened when she saw the monstrous bulk of a blue skinned man at the bar nusing a bottle of expensive liquor.

“Fan-fuckin’-tastic,” She shouted to the behemoth. “You’re just in time to see the greatest kill ever completed, big blue!”

The man didn’t move, his expression hidden behind a mane of fiery red hair.

“What’sa matter, big blue, you gone mute!?” She prodded on, stepping to his side. “I just knocked off the biggest paying job that this place has seen in months! Two hundred thousand Gil, blue boy! You got anything to beat that?”

“Quiet.” He ordered in a gruff voice.

“What was that? You’re telling me to shut up, now?” Claire spoke as if shocked. ‘You, who just beats up anyone who tries to catch him, tells me that? To be quiet!?’ She laughed long and hard, tearing up in humor. “I’ve been proving myself over and over to be unequaled in battle, and here you think you can just order me around like some common bandit!? You know, after doing this, I’m probably even better than you!”

Everyone in the bar went quiet at the accusation, knowing that what she just said was the equivalent of asking for a painful death. The massive man at the bar, however, still didn't move in face of the gloating warrior at his side. Claire pounded her fist on the bar surface, rattling his bottle to get his eyes.

"That's right!" She went on. "I declare that Claire the Demon Lance is a superior warrior and mercenary than the Flaming Amarant!"

The bulky man, the Flaming Amarant, stood up from his place at the bar, rising up to stand almost a head taller than Claire. He looked down at her with his small black eyes, mouth curled in a frown. Claire stared back at him with defiant eyes, prodding him on to battle so she could prove herself to everyone. The tall man, however, crossed his arms and snorted in disapproval.

"So you killed an old man and that makes you better?" He posed. "An old man who was in isolation in Lindblum, without his guards, and defenseless to any attacker? Pathetic."

"Why you-!!"

"When was the last time you ever got into a tough fight when the odds were against you?" He

interrupted.

“Grr...”

“I fought through a hundred guards right here in Reno and killed them all. For one year almost to this day they don’t even try to catch me. Why? Because I’m the Flaming Amarant. Men crap their pants and children cry when they hear my name. Cats and dogs cower when I walk by. Mercenaries avoid me instead of confront me.” He leaned down and placed his face in front of hers, red hair making it appear as if a halo of fire was around his head. “I could *own* this city with my reputation alone. Not a single man has ever tried to hold me up for *anything*. People would sooner give me a million Gil than for me to hunt them, and here you are, boasting like you’re queen of the fucking world because you offed one old man.”

Claire felt suddenly pale at his presence, the scent of burnt wood and the heat of intense fire wafting through her sensitive nose. She had to consciously keep herself still to stop from quaking into jelly at his withering glare. The Flaming Amarant stood up again and heaved a content sigh. He turned, picked up his bottle of spirits, then strode out of the bar without a single word interrupting his departure. The

patrons looked back to Claire, the woman still standing in shocked silence, then returned to their conversations as if nothing had happened.

“Are we feeling well?” Joachim asked from his place at the bar, a smirk on his lips.

Snapping out of her trance, she gritted her teeth and shook with checked anger. Her reputation was normally well standing in mercenary circles, but this went to show that she still had a way to go before truly earning one. Having people openly insult her wasn’t going to be ignored.

She glanced back at the man and gave a mock smile. “I’m just dandy, and you can go to hell, you bastard.”

He winced at the double meaning of her curse, but kept his composure as she left the bar. “Have a pleasant day yourself.”

* * *

“Ah, the sleepless city.” Leena sighed. “It looks miserably decrepit since last I came.”

Fedrich and Ruthy pulled to her side and stopped, taking a minute to absorb the distant beauty the city offered. Millions of glittering lights and fires gave it

a sparkle like a rare jewel on a dark cloth. An Airship pulled away from it's walls and lifted into the air for destinations unknown, the dull whine of it's engines audible to them even kilometers away.

“It’s no surprise. Treno has been suffering from more and more thievery each year. Wanted men could wander the streets with no fear from anyone nowadays.” Ruthy explained in a morose tone.

“I remember this city as an oasis in the middle of a pitch black sea of grass in years past. Nobles and esteemed members of all societies would flock here to bathe in the splendor of its rich tastes.” The red mage shook her head sadly. “It would seem that such things are now forgotten to more base desires.”

“Yes.” Fedrich agreed with a sour note. “Claire would fit in there perfectly...”

“Claire?” Leena repeated.

“She’s the person who we’re looking for.” Ruthy answered. “She backstabbed us when we needed her, then ran away before we could stop her. Fedrich... needs to find her, he’s desperate to understand why she did it.”

“It must have been a horrible betrayal.” Leena mused.

“More than you can imagine...” Fedrich added deeply, kicking his bird into motion. “Let’s go, we’re almost there.”

The two women prodded their birds on, following the Burman as he made for the main gate that led to the city proper. Trotting across trails worn into the earth, they made easy time to the gate and found numerous chocobo stalls to deposit their birds at. The chocobo’s were taken in and given food and rest, and the owner pointed them out to a shop if they needed future travel equipment. The travelers knew the birds wouldn’t be around the next day, probably rented out to another journeyman before. The stalls had an agreement with all other cities about this, they would lose chocobos to one way trips to other lands, but in turn gain an equal number of them back as travelers came to their town. Leena, however, had to shell out extra money to rent a stall for her time in Treno, unwilling to part with her pale feathered polom.

“Gods, walking on my feet feels weird.” Ruthy commented as she walked under the main arch of the city gate. “I think my lower half has fallen asleep without me!”

“I can agree to that. Perhaps we should find an Inn and take rest for the night.” Leena suggested while adjusting her pack against her shoulders. “What say you, Fedrich?”

“I suppose we should, then, my legs are just as sore.” He nodded.

“Good good, I know of a place that we can stop at on the main road off Surveyor’s Square.”

“What is it called?” Ruthy asked.

“The Golden Moon bed and bar, if I recall properly. One of the few Inns that is an average between the expense of the upper class and the shoddy keep of the lower. Treno’s polarized income brackets makes it difficult to find such middle class keepings.”

Ruthy nodded at her explanation, silently impressed with her intellect. For a short moment it felt as if Gordan were with them again, explaining the world’s designs in his knowing tones and with a gentle smile. She sighed wistfully, homesickness already tugging at her heartstrings.

“Do you know why it changed?” Fedrich asked in response to her lengthy words. “You said it was once a stylish place.”

“It could be a multitude of factors that caused it. Uneven use of money between classes, too many immigrants causing higher unemployment, unfair taxation, or even just plain greed.” She waved her hand about to draw upon the scenery. “In a situation where the rich control all major facets of the economy, eventually it will separate into a small percentage of rich people and a majority of poor people. It would be easy to assume then that the thievery and crime rate would rise greatly in response to this, and it probably was the case for Treno. Judging on exterior looks alone, it seems that it’s been that way here for many years, if not an entire decade.”

The Burman nodded wide eyed, understanding only about half of what she said. “I see...”

Leena chuckled. “Sorry, got on a tangent again. Studying books most of your life can do that, I suppose.”

“It’s alright. You remind me of someone I know in Lindblum.”

“Small world.” The mage commented.

“Yeah...” Fedrich muttered. Thinking of Gordan did little to relax his mind. He knew that Gordan

would soon come here, and that he would be hunting for Claire as well. Even the thought of her name and the atrocity behind it made him shudder in confusion, the questions and the burning need to know why she did it.

I'll find you, Claire, and I'll get the answers I need...

"Ah, we're almost there!" Leena pointed to a well kept building on stilts over the water of the canals. "The Golden Moon."

The trio walked into the Inn, immediately within the bar of the establishment that was filled with some locals and a plethora of tourists and travelers. Leena pulled aside a waitress and asked where the Inn proper was, getting a quick answer.

"Upstairs." Leena spoke to her two acquaintances.

They walked to the end of the bar and up a flight of rickety stairs, then came to a small front room with a counter and worker near the opposite end. Poor wallpapering and carpets covered the wooden boards, but looked well cared for despite the inferior quality. Leena stepped over to the counter to a young

boy who was busy flipping through a periodical of kinds.

“I’ll need two rooms for the night, sir.” She requested.

The young worker looked back to a board with numbered pegs, then drew off a pair of keys with close numbers and slid them to the mage.

“A hundred per room, two hundred for the night total.” He calculated.

“Right.” She nodded, sliding two coins to the lad.

“You didn’t need to.” Ruthy began as Leena passed her a key and led the way to their rooms.

“It’s a matter of paying you back for helping me in the field. I owed you greatly for the help, and this is the least I can do to make us even.” Leena thanked, holding up her hand to forestall any other words. “I’ll be turning in for the night. You can bunk in my room.”

“Thanks, but no. You can have a room to yourself, I’ll go with Fedrich.”

Leena and Fedrich both arched their eyes at her comment. The mage stared at Fedrich, and he stared at her and then to Ruthy. The redhead glanced up at

the Burman with a confused expression, and the two then looked back to see Leena's eyes darting between them both.

“...Alright then...” She hesitated while eyeing them, then unlocked her door. “...Goodnight.”

Once her door closed, Fedrich turned to Ruthy with confusion running rampant in his head. “Er... why did you—”

“-Because she needs some time to herself. Her friends were all killed just two days ago, remember? I don't think either of us would be comfortable in those circumstances.”

“But...!”

“What?”

“Well, it's not exactly like you'll have any privacy in one room with me.” He felt a blush run up his face. “You know...”

Ruthy smiled and patted his shoulder, moving to unlock their door. “Don't worry, it's nothing serious. Besides, we've shared a room before, what's different about this time?” Opening the door, she stepped inside and saw two small beds against one of the walls, a dresser and table on the other end.

“Look, there are two beds if you’re worried about sleeping on the floor again.”

“Alright.” He exhaled, seeing that she was unconcerned about the arrangement.

“I’ll change first, so wait a minute, okay?” She said, closing the door in Fedrich’s face.

The Burman stood still in thought, then felt his muscles uncoil as he visibly slumped in posture. Her words were accurate, but he always assumed that it was a choice made on priorities. The idea that she was comfortable sleeping in the same room with a man of a different species made him reconsider her opinions of him greatly.

Is she really that comfortable around me?...

The door opened a minute later, and Ruthy stepped into the hall dressed in a conservative sleeping gown.

“You’re turn.” She grinned.

“...Right.” He nodded, stepping inside and closing the door.

The air burned despite the pouring rain, vast waves of heat withering the life of the city away as it crumbled to the ground. The bodies of dead civilians

littered the walkways and roads, blood mingling with dirt and rainwater. Soldiers in full armor were slumped on walls and among the ruins of buildings and carts, hands clinging to their swords even in death. A crash of thunder ripped through the sky, as if the weather itself protested the slaughter beneath it's gaze.

Fedrich found himself floating through the city, disembodied and unable to control his actions.

“Mama?” A tiny voice spoke.

Fedrich’s vision expanded, allowing him to see a Burman child barely old enough to stand pushing her mother’s body. He felt a shiver of pain ripple through his mind, sadness prevailing as the girl tried to rouse her dead parents. Again his uncontrolled vision moved along the scene of chaos, his mind stressing greatly as he began to pick out details of the city and of where he was.

...a tragedy for the age...

The voice made Fedrich start, memories of similar visions returning from slumber in his consciousness. A flash of lightening lit up the dark city, and the sudden image of a grand castle loomed

in his vision, pillars crumbled and walls pocked with holes.

...wrought by greed and rage...

Burmecia. Fedrich immediately picked out the castle, the center of power for his homeland. The ruined structure looked ready to fall, the pounding rain blanketing the land and providing a dim cover to the terror that seized it.

...do not deny the call...

He couldn't think any further on the sight, unable to comprehend the kind of strength that would be able to destroy his kingdom. His parents, his friends and relatives, the people in the markets and the guards and Dragon Knights, were they all taken in this consuming destruction?

...fight them with your all...

The voice, in a deep and multi-toned command, registered clearly with Fedrich's mind. Anger and rage at the sight began to boil in his mind, his non-existent body curling in natural want to leap out and strike against whatever caused the doom of his hometown. He looked down and saw things moving in the shadows of his city, stout figures in cloaks and hats, marching together in a silent rhythm of

command. Soulless yellow eyes peered into the sky, surrounded by a black void that hid their faces. Sudden magic flared up, their gloved hands manipulating it as if clay, and then hurled it to his location. Fear exploded where anger stood, and Fedrich screamed as his vision went white.

Fedrich gasped in terror and sat up, fingers curled and seeking the comfort of his short sword. He reigned in his breath, taking in the air greedily as his eyes focused back to reality. Glancing to the bed next to his revealed that Ruthy hadn't awakened, still sleeping with her arms tangled above her hair. He wiped his face, fur matted to sweat soaked skin. Shivering in the sudden chill of the night, he wrapped his arms around his body protectively, the fear lingering on his waking mind.

"The visions." He whispered, voice cracked even as it came so meekly. "Why?"

Goddess Rei help me... I can't bear this alone again... not again...

Chapter Fourteen

This story belongs to me and my creative mind. However, most of the characters, names, and places all belong to their respective companies, so don't yell at me for copyright infringements! *Remember, Italics represent a person's thoughts or the telling of past events.*

Enjoy...

:Faraway Dreams:

Chapter Fourteen:

“Morning.” A quiet voice spoke into his ear.

Fedrich stirred, eyes opening slowly to see Ruthy at the side of his bed. He grinned, then leaned upright and rubbed his eyes clear of sleep. She stepped back and sat on her own bed, still in her off-white nightgown.

“Morning to you, too.” He replied groggily.
“Sleep well?”

“Yes. You still look exhausted, though.”

“I didn’t get much sleep.” He admitted, glancing out the window to the perpetual nightfall.

“Bad dreams?” She prodded, concerned.

“...Yeah.” He nodded, memory of the terrible vision floating in his mind’s eye. “What time is it?”

“A little after seven.”

Fedrich yawned, then stood up and stretched his arms and legs out. “Leena up?”

“I don’t know.”

“Well, we don’t need to wait up for her to start.” He figured. “She’ll probably want some alone time to think.”

Ruthy nodded absently. “Yeah.”

“You ready to go soon?”

“Not unless you want me to parade around in my nighties.” The redhead smirked.

Fedrich snorted in humor. “Funny as it would be, I’m sure you’d object.”

“Thought so. We might as well have breakfast before going, I’m sure we’ll be too busy looking for clues to stop much for afternoon meals.”

The thought of food made Fedrich's stomach rumble. "No arguments there."

The Burman sat down at the table and pulled his heavy pack onto its surface. Rummaging through it, he pulled out his water skin as well as fruits for a simple meal. Ruthy was already halfway through an apple, cutting slices free with her small knife.

"So, do you have any idea where she might be?" The redhead asked.

"Not really..." Fedrich replied, using his nails to peel the skin off of his orange. "We can start in the weapons shops to find out where warriors hang around. It shouldn't be much tougher to find out where the unsavory types linger from there. Word about Setzer's death will be big news, whoever paid her to kill him will hopefully be common knowledge to the thugs and thieves."

"What about the guards? Can't we ask them?"

"We can, but I don't think they'll be very helpful."

"I'm... just concerned about our safety. You got mugged in the open last time we were here, I don't want to know what they do to people in their territory asking questions."

“Predators who defend their turf with lethal force...” Fedrich mused, thinking to his beastiary training. Munching on a slice of fruit, he looked over to his companion to see her brushing the snarls out of her unbraided hair. Her reddish locks looked radiant even in the weak, artificial light of the lamp, something he’d never taken notice of before. “...you think they’d attack us just for being around?”

“I wouldn’t put it past them.” She warned.

“Well, if it comes to that, we’ll make them regret it.” He boasted.

“Mm-hmm.” She hummed.

The two remained quiet for a few minutes, busying themselves with morning routines. Once finished eating, Fedrich tossed the food scraps into a wastebasket near the window and picked up his sword. Setting it on the table, he unsheathed it and began wiping it down with an oiled rag, scrubbing at old stains and marks with a scrutinizing eye. Glancing up momentarily, he saw Ruthy sitting still, her eyes unfocused and staring at the floor while he fingers lazily twirled locks of hair around. He set his work down, the clink of metal on wood catching her attention.

“You still tired?” Fedrich asked cautiously.

“A little...” She murmured.

Something in her voice made him think otherwise. “...Something bothering you?”

“No... yes.” She answered, chuckling at herself. “I guess I’m a little anxious about all this.”

“We’ll be fine.”

“It’s just... I’m normally used to danger, we immerse ourselves in it every day!” She crossed her arms around her body. “Now, though, it’s just us. No Gerick to bark orders, no Macky and his jokes, no Illis to make fun of things or Gordan to back us up with his intellect, just you and me...”

“Scared?”

“That, too, I guess.” She admitted.

“Well, no need to worry, I’ll protect you from anyone who tries anything I don’t like, on my honor!” Fedrich swore.

“Thanks.” She smiled.

Except... who will protect you?...

Moonlight poured across the cobblestone paths in Reno, making it easy to navigate across bridges and through alleys. A vast number of nobles were out, followed by entourages of servants or friends, chatting away about mundane things. The two Regulators had to restrain themselves from gawking at the sheer volume of vanity the rich indulged themselves in. The stark contrast between the nobles and the majority of poor people was surprising to them, even after being in Reno weeks before. Curious still was that there was hardly any tension between the two classes, as if everyone had accepted their social ranks and held no animosity to one another.

Morning progressed into the noontime hour before they found a large weapons depot within the upper levels of Knight's Square. The door opened with a jingle of a bell, Fedrich stepping inside first with a quick look around the room. Racks of armor and weapons were against the wall or suspended from the ceiling by thick chains. Clawed feet rapped out a steady percussion on the grated floor as the two approached the front counter, an aging woman drumming her fingers together.

“G’afternoon, you be needin’ something today?” She asked brightly.

“We’re looking for some information.” Fedrich nodded.

The woman eyed him for a second, eyes telling that she assumed he was a simple tourist. “If ya need directions ’ta somewhere, the guards can tell you.”

“No, I just need to know where local fighters hang around.” The Burman corrected.

“Eh? What’re doin’ that needs that kinda information?”

“I’m looking for someone...” He began slowly, watching her reaction before saying anything further. “...someone dangerous, who’d be paid to kill people.”

The elderly lady gulped nervously. “I ain’t into that business, boy, no way!”

Fedrich backtracked. “No, I don’t mean I want to hire someone, heavens no! There’s a particular someone who came here a few days ago that I need to find, and they’re the type to do that kind of dirty work.”

The woman tugged at her necktie. “Well, anyone like that would be in Cutthroat Circle, fer sure.”

“And where’s that?”

“Below.” She pointed down. “Down ’ta stairs to the below streets.”

“Thanks.” Fedrich nodded, walking away from the counter.

“I wouldn’t go there, if I were you!” She called out as he reached the door. “It’s a horrible place fer anyone these days.”

The Burman sighed. “It’s going to be horrible business, what we’ve got.”

Leaving the depot, he looked around the area for any staircases that led below. His feet were aware that they had climbed up several flights to get where they were, so it made sense there were additional neighborhoods on lower levels. The expression the woman wore just moments earlier, though, made his fur ripple in nervous fright. Someone who catered to warriors was afraid of them that greatly?

“I think there were some stairs leading down the way we came.” Ruthy suggested.

“Alright, let’s check them.” Fedrich nodded, leading the way.

The two backtracked a long distance, passing by growing numbers of people out shopping on the

scattered carts or dining in restaurants. Tourists, too, were flocking to well known places in the city, dressed in a middle class fashion that was all but absent to Treno's true population. Soon they found a diverging road that led down towards the center of the city where the lower class resided, the rich lording over them from the edges of the walls. The further down to the center they got, the less they noticed people walking around and more just milling about bars or in groups. Ruthy kept close to Fedrich as they continued, their arms almost bumping into one another in their natural gait.

“I’m worried.” She whispered.

“Chin up, Ruthy.” He cooed. “We’re just walking through, they can’t fault us for that.”

“Let’s hope so.”

The sun/moon rose into the center of the sky, signifying the start of the afternoon as they came into the most treacherous part of the city so far. Whereas people were relaxing in the streets with shopping or work, those same people were sprawled against walls or on the ground in drunken stupors. Not a single Treno guard had been seen for a long while, and warriors were walking along with their weapons proudly displayed, many of them coated in

dried blood. Fedrich stopped a moment, his ears twitching shortly before his eyes narrowed dangerously.

“Fedrich, what’s—”

“Ey now, what do we ’ave here!” A thick voice asked from behind.

The two Regulators turned around, seeing two men and a familiar third approaching them. Fedrich maintained his expression, ears giving him advance knowledge of their approach. Ruthy stepped close to his side, eyes wide with surprise.

“You two look lost, methinks.” The same voice assumed, grinning. “We can ‘elp you get directions, ’cept it’ll cost you somethin’ to compensate fer our time.”

“We’re not lost.” Fedrich stated, voice direct.

“Oh, I think you are.” The other man started. “Not just anyone wanders in here, you know, and you both look terribly out of place.”

“Come on, now, let’s see some money.” The first ordered, pulling a large dagger from his back.

Fedrich’s hand snaked down to his belt, and with a quick motion he drew out his sword and assumed a

defensive stance, placing himself in front of Ruthy.
“Back off, I don’t want a fight.”

“Oh, but you’ve got one now!” The man growled, lunging.

Fedrich ducked down and avoided the attack, then used his legs to propel his body into the man’s chest, knocking him off balance. He then stepped forwards and brought the hilt of his sword down on the man’s forehead, sending him reeling into the cobblestone in a faint. The second man was drawing out a large section of metal pipe when an arrow sunk into his foot, the thief screaming out his frustrations. The two Regulators looked at the third man who was standing in surprise, and Fedrich immediately recognized him as the wounded man hobbled away.

“Hey, you’re that thief from before!”

“Wha? I dunno what you’re talking about!” The four armed man shouted, his arms reaching behind to pull a broadsword free from a scabbard handing behind his legs. “I’ll cut you inta pieces, though, and see if it refreshes my memory!”

The four-armed thief charged, and Fedrich blocked the attack with his sword. He jumped back as the man’s additional limbs pulled out daggers and

stabbed at him, making the fight suddenly one sided. His arms moved around in a dangerous dance, weapons glinting in the weak moonlight. Chancing a wound, Fedrich jumped close and attacked with short and fast strikes of his blade. What attacks the thief couldn't defend with his broadsword his two daggers could deflect, all but negating everything the Burman tried.

The bandit laughed. "Heh ha! No one can get through my defense!"

"We'll see..." Fedrich sneered. "Ruthy!"

As if reading his intentions by words alone, the redhead complied and fired another arrow, the projectile striking the man's sword and sending him off balance. Fedrich leap in and slapped the sword away with his own, then forced the bandit to retreat several steps to regain his footing. With an anger that bubbled to the surface, he pressed on and reversed the odds completely, the lowly thief unable to do anything more than block his repeated attacks. Growling like a feral animal, he spun on his heel, knocked a dagger from the bandit's grip, then stabbed forwards, and pierced the smaller man's arm.

“Gya!!” The bandit cried, falling onto his rear with Fedrich’s blade between his eyes. “Don’t kill me! Please, I beg of ya!”

“Do you know anyone by the name of Claire the Demon Lance?” The Burman asked stiffly.

“No, I never heard of the guy!”

“How about who ordered Setzer Gestahl to be assassinated?”

“I don’t know!” He repeated.

Fedrich pushed the blade closer. “I think you do.”

“Alright, alright!! It was a guy called Joachim! He owns a place called the Sins Harvest, okay!?”

“One more thing, does this mean anything?” He continued, pulling out the black bandana with the bloody rose emblem.

The thief looked at it for a moment, his eyes twitching. “It’s... it’s the symbol for the assassin cult! How did you get that!?”

“None of your concern.” Fedrich pulled his sword back slightly. “Now go.”

“Right, right!” He cried, scrabbling for his lost weapons before taking off down a street.

Fedrich wiped the small amount of blood off his sword with a small rag, then sheathed the blade. He looked back to Ruthy, the redhead slinging her longbow across her body and capping her quiver. Many of the onlookers of the brief scrabble began to go back to their previous tasks, eyes taking note of the exchange.

“You okay, Fedrich?” Ruthy asked.

“I’m fine.”

“No, I mean...” He struggled for words. “Weren’t you being a little too rough? It isn’t like you.”

“Maybe... but I needed to make sure he understood that I’ve got no time for him or his flunky cohorts.” Fedrich snorted. “I have got to find Claire, and now that we’ve got a lead, there’s no time to waste.”

Ruthy nodded, although a bit worried.

Within the streets, people walked to the side of the center as a towering individual casually strode down the path. His presence on the road was enough to unnerve anyone who came close, many of them

stopping to stare at him in fear and curiosity. The fact that a loud mouthed Burman was following his path also drew strange looks.

“Come on, you pansy! Fight me already!”

“I’m not in the mood.”

“You had better as hell get in the mood or I’ll rip your mangy hair out by the roots!”

“Sure, sure.”

The Burman drew her lance out and swung wildly at the large man’s head. However, he raised a single hand and caught the weapon just below the sharp blade and yanked it out of the woman’s hand. The Burman growled and tried to get it back, but the man kept it just out of her reach.

“Bastard, give it back!” Claire screamed.

“Sorry, this’ll sell for a week of good eating.” Amarant corrected. “Second time you’ve lost one to me, isn’t it?”

“I swear, I’m gonna peel your skin off your body bit by bit and sell it for coats and blankets! I’ll boil your body and make glue out of it! Once I’m done with you, you’ll—”

“Don’t you ever shut up?” The mammoth man sighed. “I’m going deaf.”

“You’ll be going to hell and worse if you don’t give me my lance!” She screamed, futilely grabbing for her weapon.

The two continued their back and forth arguing, walking through the streets as onlookers stared at them oddly. One man, though, charged down the middle of the street while looking behind him. The running man collided into Amarant’s body, sending him into the ground while hardly unbalancing the fiery haired mercenary. The two met eyes for a moment, and the fallen man scrambled to his feet.

“Oh man, oh man!” He sputtered, waving his arms in surrender. “Sorry, sorry!”

He took off down the street again, voice carrying on in panic. For a moment the two bickering mercenaries looked at one another in confusion, then continued down the street in their usual rancor.

“Damn you, give me my lance back!” She continued.

The blue skinned mercenary growled. “Maybe if you didn’t follow me around like a lost puppy you

wouldn't end up with your weapons getting snatched. Don't you have anything better to do?"

Claire grinned. "Nope, annoying you is as fun as things get between jobs."

"Of all the luck..." He muttered.

"Come on, a lady's gotta find ways to make a name for herself. Sooner or later I'm gonna beat you at your game and be a real legend in this city!" She gloated.

"And why does this concern me?"

"'Cause you're the top dog here! If I beat you, I'll get everyone's respect!"

Amarant rubbed his head in frustration. "I don't know why I let you live..."

Minutes later, as they approached one of the few squares within the lower streets, Claire's incessant bickering died down as her eyes spied someone in the crossroads. Her pace slowed to a halt, and the Flaming Amarant continued on his way with her forgotten lance in hand. As if sensing her presence, the figure stopped his animated conversation with a redhead woman and looked up, two pairs of green eyes meeting one another again. The moment went

by in a crawl, sparks of recognition lighting up his eyes.

Claire felt her skin pale in surprise.

*Fedrich... Castor... how in hell did he get here?
Did he track me?*

The figure, Fedrich, went still in shock. His redhead friend looked to her as well, revealing herself to be his friend in arms, Ruthy. The moment passed, and Fedrich's hand immediately went to the grip of his short sword.

"I found you, Claire!" He announced, drawing his blade free.

Claire shook her head, then put her hands on her hips and laughed, aiming to take control of the situation before he could try anything. "Well well! It looks like you found me, comrade."

"You've got a lot to answer for! Why did you betray me?" He asked.

Claire sighed. "I've told you time and time again, I betrayed no one! There was never a time that I was allied with you."

"What about your promise! Your vow as a Regulator!"

“That was just a promise to defend the people of Lindblum from any harm and to fight with nothing held back!” She argued, holding up a finger to forestall him. “And less you forget, I made that promise to Gerick, not you!”

Fedrich looked visibly angry, his fur on end and his muscles tensed. “I put my trust in you and you betrayed it! You can’t deny that!”

“I don’t deny that, I used ‘ya and you fell for it like the idiot ‘ya are!” Claire grinned maliciously. “When are you going to accept that and move on? Don’t tell me you can all the way here to argue that again.”

The Regulator growled, then pointed his sword at her. “Fine! If you’re not going to explain yourself, then I’ll just capture you and turn in a wanted murderer instead!”

Running across the cobblestone with adrenaline boosted anger, he tried to attack. Claire merely jumped back from his stroke, repeating the maneuver each time he blindly came at her. The mercenary snickered at his efforts, wishing she had her lance to really insult his skill. Dodging his thrust, she swiped at his muzzle with her claws and raked across fur and flesh, drawing some blood. He

screamed in frustration, his attacks becoming less and less accurate.

“Bah, you’re acting even worse than before!” She taunted.

“Goddess damn you...” He swore.

Claire snickered, then broke into laughter as a curious idea came to mind. “Tell you what, ol’ friend! If you’re so intent on fighting me now, let’s do it where no one will interfere with it. Tomorrow at noon, alone, at the center of the Grand Maria! I’ll make my stand there, and either you kill me, or I’ll kill you. What do you say?”

The Regulator stood still a moment, then gulped a breath of air. “I accept.”

Claire cackled madly, then leapt into the skies to a higher street, disappearing from view. “Be ready, comrade!” Her voice carried over the wind.

The Author Speaks!

Howzitgoin’, everybody, time for your ten ’o clock news update.

First off, an answer for **Robshi**, Mysidia would be located just before the bridge that leads to the Secret Library Dagurerro, a city where all those

people live and work at when not otherwise studying. Random fact: Anytime a Final Fantasy game had a city named Mysidia, it is always a place filled with white and black mages who study books or are knowledgeable in the lore of the crystals. In this case, it's the hometown that red mages usually hail from.

Next, I've finally unveiled the newest incarnation of the Information Database! Spread out over different pages, you don't have to play scrollfest to find things. Also I added the largest section yet, a small collection of self made texts on the history of the Mist Continent. Have fun checking it all out, peeps! Later!

Chapter Fifteen

This story belongs to me and my creative mind. However, most of the characters, names, and places all belong to their respective companies, so don't yell at me for copyright infringements! *Remember, Italics represent a person's thoughts or the telling of past events.*

Enjoy...

:Faraway Dreams:

Chapter Fifteen:

The hours passed in silent anticipation of the coming match between the two Burman warriors. Afternoon slid into evening and then night, and the cresting of the sun shown moon brought an uneasy morning for Fedrich and Ruthy. Dreamless sleep left him tired, his mind still unsettled with his inability to comprehend Claire's attitude. Ruthy assurances were of little help to him, although the effort was quietly appreciated. Leena offered her advice and worldly opinions, although the mage couldn't fully take in the pain that Claire caused them. As the clock slowly made its way to the noon hour, Ruthy

decided that they should go and eat something, having skipped over dinner for a simple snack.

The Playwright's bar looked the same as it did weeks ago, filled with many patrons and smelling of old smoke and freshly cooked foods. A waitress led them to a table, and Ruthy ordered two minted teas and took the seat closest to the door. Fedrich rested his head on his hands and stared absently at the table, eyes glazed over as his mind ran around in futile worry. Ruthy took a sip of the tea, then folded her hands and looked at the Burman.

“Are you okay?” She asked.

No response.

Ruthy sighed lightly, now knowing that this was affecting him greatly. He wouldn't ignore her conversations under any situation, but trying to deal with Claire's betrayal was draining him. She understood it well enough, the betrayal by someone you could trust, but for whatever reasons Fedrich couldn't get it.

Is it... that he's never experienced this feeling before? Or is there something more... is he really that emotionally invested in this? It is because she's a Burman like him?

“Would you two care to order?” An older woman asked, a worker.

Ruthy snapped out of her thoughts and quickly scanned the menu beneath her hands. “I’ll have... the potato salad and a ginger ale.”

“And you, sir?”

Fedrich hesitated a moment. “I’ll just have the spiced fish filet and a lemonsnap with no ice.”

“Good, your meal will be ready in about ten minutes.” The waitress bowed lightly, then walked away.

“So you can talk.” Ruthy smirked after a moment. “I thought you had gone mute or something.”

“Sorry, I’m... just not in the mood.” He apologized weakly.

“I understand, you must be confused about all this.”

“More than you know.”

“No, I think I do.” She corrected, taking a breath as she collected stale but pungent memories. ‘I’ve been betrayed by people I trusted before, it’s nothing

new to me. Back when I still worked at Miss Hillis' bakery, there was a boy who always came to visit me. He always talked to me about his dream to be in the army as a great warrior, that he wanted to be the best person he could.' Ruthy wrung her hands together under the table, the pain associated with her story resurfacing. "One day he asked me if I wanted to have a late night snack, and I agreed. He was always nice to me, even brought me flowers one time with a poem he wrote. He led me into an alley and he... he pinned me to the wall and tried to force himself on me. I screamed and screamed, and someone came and saved me before he could. The boy never came back... but I was scared to work for weeks. He lied to me, made up stories and played me for a fool. Miss Hillis told me to forget the sorrow, that there's always tomorrow to think of. I was so confused, I couldn't look at someone and not think are they lying to me? Will they try and take advantage of me?"

Ruthy forced a grin to her face, struggling to keep tears from her eyes as she relived the terrible memory. "But I survived it. I got over the betrayal, because not everyone is like that. It was tough to think that there are people who do such horrible things, but I learned to accept it as part of life and of

living. I mean, without bad things in life, we wouldn't be able to appreciate the good things as much, right?"

Fedrich remained silent, but she could tell that he was mulling over her words in his mind.

"What I'm trying to say... is that her betrayal was a terrible thing, it shouldn't have ever happened. But she did, and you've got to take the pain, learn from it, and go on living." Ruthy paused a moment. "I don't want to see you frozen like this, locked in your own pain because you can't accept it. We've got to take the pain in stride, and never let it hold us down."

She finally gave him the silence he wanted, allowing him all the time he wanted to come to his own conclusions, hoping her own experiences would give him the strength to surpass his own. A waiter came by their table and set their meals down, and Ruthy paid for both their lunches as well as a tip. The two ate in silence, looking at one another occasionally and struggling to come to words, but only able to display emotional feelings at the moment. Once done, Fedrich stood up and straightened his mythril vest.

“Ruthy.” He started slowly. “I’m sorry I’ve been so rude.”

“It’s okay!” She stood as well. “You’ve got a lot on your mind, it’s fine.”

“Still, I shouldn’t have ignored you, especially when you told me something so private as that.” He looked at her eyes with a genuine expression of sadness. “I wish that no one would ever betray one another, everyone would be so much happier. But you are right, it’s all part of what makes us who we are, accepting the good and bad things. I think... that I can move on, and now all that’s left is to make sure that she can never betray anyone again.”

Moving away from the table and back to the streets, Fedrich looked at his pocketwatch and nodded to himself. Ruthy came to his side as he looked around the area, people starting to crowd the paths as the afternoon rush began.

“Is it time?” The redhead asked meekly.

“Yes.” He glanced back at her. “It’s time to bring this to a close.”

“I’ll go with you, too.”

He shook his head. “She said it was for me alone, I don’t want you to be in any danger if she goes berserk.”

“Still...!”

Putting a finger to her lips, he silenced her arguments and instead caught her eyes in his own. “I know you want to help me, but this is something I need to get through on my own. I can’t let people hold me by the hand forever, I’ve got to face my troubles head on.” He stepped back, donning his trademark grin. “Besides, dangerous work is what I’m looking for.”

He used his powerful legs to leap into the sky, sailing across the wind to a rooftop. Ruthy gasped in surprise as he leapt from home to home, making his way towards the amphitheater with incredible speed.

“Ruthy?” A voice asked.

“Huh?” She looked back, seeing a familiar figure in red robes. “Leena?”

“You go to the Playwright as well?” The mage asked, walking from a sidestreet to the redhead’s side. “It’s a popular place for scholars and fans of the arts, I wasn’t aware you were a fan also.”

“No, yes, I mean... ach!” Her tongue tripped over itself. “Fedrich just ran off to fight Claire on his own, and I’ve got to go and make sure he doesn’t lose to her!”

“Did something happen?”

“Yesterday we found her, and she challenged him to a fight to the death this afternoon! Fedrich can’t win on his own, she’s like a monster when she fights, every part of her focused solely on killing!”

Leena arched an eyebrow. “Sounds like a tough wench.”

“Could you go with me, please? I wouldn’t have asked, but if she doesn’t hold back, I’ll need all the help I can find!”

Leena nodded. “I owe you both, so count my skills in. Lead on!”

The bench seating was empty, and Fedrich felt strange walking so freely in a space that he only knew as crowded and filled with the applause of noblemen and fans of plays. He was able to take in the immense size of the Grand Maria without obstruction, and it looked awe inspiring in design alone. Its spacious room was surely the reason Claire chose it for their duel. Despite his cautious

patrol of the outside seating, he couldn't see any sign of her presence in the semi-lit stage. Growling, he skipped down to the stage proper and looked around.

"Claire!" He shouted loudly. "Where are you!? Show yourself!"

A cruel laugh came from the top most part of the stage overhang. Fedrich looked up to a spot lit by a bright beam of artificial light, seeing Claire present with a new lance in hand, a gust of wind adding to the drama of her appearance. He noted that her lance was edged on both ends, one with a crescent blade and another with a dangerous spike.

"It's about time you came, Fedrich!" She sneered. "I got bored waiting for 'ya!"

The Regulator drew his sword free and readied his body. "Let's go, then, and get this over with!"

"Oh? You look serious this time."

"I've gotten over your betrayal, Claire, I came to grips with it after so much thought." He raised his sword up. "Now I'm here to claim your lance and send you into prison for killing a helpless man!"

The female Burman laughed again, pride and arrogance laced within her voice. She shoved a few strands of hair aside from her face, then spun her lance around and pointed it at Fedrich.

“Fedrich, out of anyone who has fought me, you have been the most fanatical about capturing me. Not that you’d care, but you’ve proven to be a worthy opponent, and you have my respect as a fellow warrior.” Crouching lightly, she held her lance back and grinned. “I’m sorry to have to end your life this day!”

Claire leapt into the sky and spun her lance to attack, and Fedrich readied his defense. Lance met sword, and the two battled for supremacy before jumping away from one another. Fedrich charged in a rage, striking out at Claire with repeated swings of his short blade. The blonde Burman deflected each strike with ease, then spun her lance about to throw Fedrich off balance. She thrusted her weapon out quickly, but Fedrich managed to dodge fast enough to only suffer a light laceration against his muzzle. They leapt back again, coiled like serpents.

“You’ve still got spunk, kid, better than before!” Claire commended.

“Damn, I won’t lose this time!”

Charging at one another, Claire's lance shot out and collided with Fedrich's short sword, metal ringing out. In her trademark fury, she lashed out repeatedly with her weapon, forcing her opponent back. A quick thrust cut his shoulder, a gasp of pain following the spill of blood. Pushed on by the sight of his life's essence, she took to her toes and danced, lance spinning around her body with beautiful and deadly motions. Fedrich was all but forced to retreat and keep his sword up, parrying her strikes with weak attempts to get a word in. Blood flew as she nicked his ear, sliced at an arm, nearly lopped off his own tail.

“Come on, you can do better!” She demanded. “Show me, show me your anger! Your rage! Give it to me!”

She used her lance accurately to fling Fedrich's arms up, and she lashed into his side with the curved blade. Surprising her, the cloth of his vest held and stopped the weapon from piercing his torso. Using her moment of vulnerability, he brought his sword down and tried to take her shoulder, but the mythril armor on her shoulder guard absorbed the stock with ease. At a stalemate, Claire jumped back and looked over her shoulder, grinning to see the armor still held.

“I take it back, you still have a lot ’ta learn before you ever come close to matching me!” Claire ran forward and brought her lance down at an angle.

Fedrich growled and dived into her attack. His sword snaked into her defenses and blocked the swing at the top of her grip, and with a mighty cry, he tore the lance from her hand and sent it spinning into the air. Thrusting the blade out with no avail, he watched as she jumped into the sky and expertly caught her rouge weapon, landing on the overhang of the stage. Jumping up higher with her lance spinning, she readied to throw it against her adversary. With a powerful motion, the lance sailed through the air and cut through Fedrich’s left shoulder, a guttural cry of pain bursting from his mouth as he fell. Claire landed and bounced over to his side, the Regulator curled on the ground and holding his wound.

“Crap, you’re tougher than I thought.” She swore, leaning over and pulling the lance free of the wooden floor. “But not tough enough to beat me, of course.”

“Just... answer me this, Claire... why do you do it?” He gasped. “Why do you toy with people this way?”

She barked a laugh. “It’s all just a part of the game! I used you to help with the mission, as I do with anyone who can make it easier for me. I didn’t have anything against you personally, but that can’t be helped if you make yourself a threat.”

“But—”

“Shut up!” She ordered, feral anger flashing through her eyes. “I’m through playing games with you! Be a good boy and die!”

She took the lance, reversed it to the spike, and drove it down to kill him with one blow. Instinct and training, however, allowed Fedrich to roll to his side and avoid the lethal attack. Countering, he got to his feet and swung his sword out wide, catching Claire’s hip in a painful strike that cut shallow flesh. Despite his wounds, he jumped into the air and arched backwards, performing a perfect flip and landing with his defense up. Claire charged for Fedrich, and the two locked weapons with stronger fury. The Regulator leapt above Claire’s lance and lashed out with his feet, clawed toes raking across her face, leaving bloody scratches behind. Skipping back, she slapped away Fedrich’s weak follow up and gave herself some room from his sword.

“I don’t understand you!” Fedrich stated angrily, forcing his pain down. “Why do you deceive so many innocents?”

“You never understood me in the first place!” She yelled, again attacking.

Fedrich blocked the strike and made his own offenses. “I don’t believe you! You acted boastful around us, but you were happy to fight alongside everyone and to share in the camaraderie! There’s no way you could have faked it all, no deception can be that real!”

Claire hesitated a moment and defended against the sword, letting her anger slip. “Maybe... just maybe it was fun to relax and not be under so much stress... but I had a job to do, and Claire the Demon Lance doesn’t stop until victory or death!!”

Jumping back to the edge of the stage, the blonde Burman charged forward with a battle cry, lance up and ready. Fedrich jumped forward with his sword in hand, but his clawed feet slipped on something on the wood and he fell forward with a start. Time paused as Fedrich watched in horror as the mistaken fall sent his sword plunging deep into Claire’s torso as she neared him. Her expression widened as she felt the steel pierce her, warm blood staining her fur

as it seeped from the wound. She stumbled forward on uneven feet, dropping her lance absently in the shock.

“Oh no...” Fedrich gasped, recovering to stare at the wound.

Claire met Fedrich’s shocked gaze, her eyes wide in disbelief. Her hand grabbed the blade and pulled it free, crying out in pain, her voice weak and filled with none of the venom from before. The Regulator ran forward and caught her before she collapsed, staring at the wound with a stunned expression and numb mind.

“Claire?...” He muttered. “Goddess, Claire, I didn’t—”

“Shut up.” She ordered, voice weak but forceful. “I would’ve... done the same to you.”

“No, I never meant to do this. You aren’t going to die.” He wavered visibly.

“What are you saying? I’m your *enemy*...”

“I don’t want you to die like this, everyone deserves a chance to make up their errors, even you...”

“What a naive child...” She laughed, coughing up blood. “You’re too soft...”

Fedrich remained silent, so Claire reached up and put a hand on his uninjured shoulder, pulling herself to his side in a last effort to speak. “But, if things were... different, maybe... maybe we would have been true comrades... Fedrich...”

With those last words, her grip on his shoulder failed, and her body fell completely into his hands, her life extinguished. He stared at her, unable to tear his eyes away from the content smile that graced her lips, light green eyes staring into the sky. He set her gently onto the floor, closing her eyes as he felt angry tears slide into his fur.

“I’m sorry...” He spoke quietly, kneeling next to her fallen body. “May the Goddess Rei take mercy on your soul and allow you to repay your deeds.”

After offering his short prayer, Fedrich struggled to his feet, the throbbing pain in his shoulder becoming more noticeable as adrenaline faded from his veins. He slowly walked over to his sword, wiped it crudely on his pants, then sheathed it. He gripped his shoulder with his free hand, hoping to stem the loss of blood. Shuddering, he grew aware that a half dozen other cuts were freely bleeding all

over his body. The stage was still completely empty, his thoughts wandering back to the play he saw not but weeks earlier. Would the crowds be cheering still if they were here?

“Fedrich!!” A scream cut through the air.

The Burman looked up, his vision hazy and his balance fading away. He saw a redheaded form rushing down the steps just before his vision blacked out entirely, consciousness slipping into blissful darkness.

“Fedrich!!” Ruthy screamed in horror, seeing blood on the stage and on Fedrich’s fur and clothing. Her feet automatically ran for him, boots pounding on the stone as she leapt down the steps to the center of the playhouse. Her friend went slack and fell to the ground, and she nearly fell onto his body in her rush to get to his side. She quickly grabbed his arms and pulled him onto his back. ‘Fedrich, wake up!’ She cried out, patting his muzzle to rouse him. ‘Come on, get up!’

She looked him over quickly, fear coiling in her gut as she saw several deep cuts on his arms and legs, his shoulder mangled from a terrible wound. Fingers quickly dived into her pockets, pulling out rolls of bandages and cloths. With calculating moves

that her instinct controlled, she wiped away the blood and covered each cut with thick cloth, binding it tightly with bandages to secure them in place. Potions were uncorked and gently poured over the wounds to speed the healing, knowing that he wasn't in any condition to drink them. Tears spilled from her eyes as she worked, her mind shocked into silence.

"Serpent's wrath, what happened?" A voice demanded.

Ruthy looked back, seeing Leena nearly stumble down the steps and land at her side, gasping for air. The mage rested a moment, then paled as she beheld the aftermath of the duel.

"Fedrich, he's—" Ruthy started.

"Hurt, yes, stand aside." She ordered.

"But he needs help!" The redhead argued.

"I'm a *mage*, if you recall, I can try a curative spell." Leena reminded, pulling the Regulator away. She closed her eyes and focused on her spiritual mantras, calling on her sacred arts of casting. Hypnotic sparks of lights circled around her body, then rested on her fingers. Placing them near

Fedrich's body, she forced open the barrier between her own life's power and reshaped it into a spell.

"Cure!" She commanded, sealing the spell off and ordering its action.

The dancing lights on her hands spun away, reforming into green bands of magic that circled and wove themselves around Fedrich's body. Immediately his wounds began to close, flesh knitting itself back and blood sinking into the skin. A few seconds later the spell ended, nearly healing over the minor wounds but doing little to help his shoulder.

"Hells, this figures." She swore, repeating her previous actions and readying a second healing spell directly over his serious injury. "...Cure!"

Fedrich's body glowed with the effort of Leena's spell, and his minor cuts completely scabbed up and were safe. His shoulder, however, refused to do more than slightly decrease in its severity. Leena wiped her brow from the exertion, standing.

"Damn, damn! It's too serious for me to heal, we need to get a doctor to him, quickly!"

Ruthy ran forward and took her remaining bandages, circling them around his shoulder to try

and cover it properly. Leena knelt down and grabbed his good shoulder, hefting him upright. The redhead moved to support his other side, but the sight of the gruesome wound made her hesitate.

“Can’t be helped, just do it!” The mage ordered.

Ruthy grimaced, then put her arm underneath the Burman’s own and helped pick his body up. The two began a careful walk back up the stairs of the amphitheater, Leena muttering curses while Ruthy could do little else but keep moving. The redhead looked to Fedrich’s face and choked back her tears, knowing that if she succumbed to them now, she wouldn’t be able to help save him.

The first thing that Fedrich knew was a dull pain in his left shoulder, a throbbing that made his whole arm stiff and numb. Slowly he could feel the residual pain of other wounds on his body, and eventually his whole form was apparent to him. His first measured breath smelled of medical herbs and flowers, cold air around his face. He put all his effort into opening his eyes, vision dizzy before focusing on the bright shine of an artificial lamp. He looked around slowly, white plaster walls consisting of his room and bare amounts of furnishing. His lips were

dry, mouth seemingly filled with sand that made him incredibly thirsty.

His last sense, the one he prided most, came around a few seconds later. While no one was in the room, he could easily hear someone sobbing outside, the dull patterns of footfalls, and muted voices that sounded vaguely familiar. Fedrich summoned his strength and sat up, thick covers sliding to his waist and his good arm supporting his weak body. A look at his shoulder revealed that it was tightly bandaged, explaining its stiffness. Slowly taking in the content of the room, he was certain that it wasn't familiar to him at all. He searched his memory, fuzzy from sleep and weariness.

That's right, I was fighting Claire on the stage... she got my shoulder, and...

Fedrich clenched his fist, unable to remember exactly how he ended up where he was. His ears perked up as more voices appeared outside his room, and he suspected that someone took him to a medical hall to treat his injuries.

“Hello?” He called out.

The voices quieted down, and barely a second later the door in the far corner of the room flew open

with a crash. The figure didn't even allow Fedrich's eyes adjust to the brighter light in the hallway before it ran into the room and threw its arms around him in a desperate embrace.

"Oh thank God!" A familiar voice wept.

"Ruthy?"

"We thought you'd never wake up." She choked between sobs. "You were hurt so badly..."

"How long... have I been here?"

"Two days, and you never moved at all. The doctors tried everything, and you didn't change."

Fedrich didn't speak as she cried, bringing his arms around her to support her despite his sore shoulder. She gripped him tighter as she let her tears fall without shame, her sobs quaking her small frame with each breath. The Burman looked to the door and saw Leena and two men in white garments maintaining a respectful distance from the door, allowing them some privacy as they talked. He closed his eyes and rested his head against her hair, willing to let her work out her tears.

Minutes later, her cries lessened until she grew quiet. Fedrich withdrew from her to look at her face,

slick and puffy with tears. The few times he had seen her cry wasn't comparable to this, it looked as if her whole world had fallen apart. The sight of such sadness made his heart heavy with feelings he didn't have an explanation for.

“You okay?” He asked quietly.

She nodded weakly, then pulled him close again and rested her head in the nook of his shoulder. “I'm okay.”

“...That's good.” He replied a moment later. He shifted around in the bed, trying to make himself comfortable, but Ruthy's hold tightened slightly.

“Stay.” She asked, voice muffled by his fur. “Let me stay here...”

He arched an eyebrow to her request, but he wasn't going to deny it. “Sure.”

Fedrich's eyes caught Leena peering into the room for a moment. Upon seeing the two, a curious grin expressed itself on her lips, and she leaned in only so far as to close the door quietly. He chuckled inwardly, then looked down at the redhead in his arms.

“Ruthy?” He asked.

She didn't respond, his ears telling that her breathing was even and controlled. Looking down at her, he saw her eyes were closed and her grip wasn't as strong as before, asleep. A smile tugged at his lips, and he slid back into the pillows of his bed with Ruthy's thin body resting against his own. He sighed contently, closing his eyes so that sleep could bring him into gentle rest.

Darkness fell across the streets and buildings, the moon shielded by thick clouds and a pitiful speckling of rainfall dampening the ground. Fedrich looked around in curiosity, recognizing the rounded and delicate details of Burmecia's oldest neighborhoods. None of his fellow people were present in the streets, windows unlit with candles and the only sound present to his powerful hearing being the dull patter of falling raindrops.

Quiet, isn't it?

Fedrich looked behind him, and he saw a figure leaning against an intersection fountain, rolling a small red gem in thin fingers. He peered into the cloak to see the person, but the shadows hid its face, and the voice sounded neutral enough to be either a man or a woman. The figure stood up, then tossed the gem into the fountain. The water quickly

changed to a red color, thick like blood, making Fedrich shiver in fear.

Even to your Burman ears, it's quiet, like death.

“Who are you?”

No one important. I figure myself a historian if you must know.

Fedrich arched an eyebrow. “You... are you the same phantom who came to me in those visions before?”

The figure chuckled. Ah, so the anchor still remembers it's previous chain. He was unsuited for this task, so they assigned me to be more candid with you on the matter.

“What matter?”

You recall the messages that the previous voice, your so-called “phantom speaker”, told you of?

“Yeah, I think.” Fedrich rubbed his head absently. “He said... something about me being able to change the future, that I could help stop a war from destroying the world...”

Recall, too, that he tried to give you information about being connected closely to a certain thing

that was a factor in the war. We weren't ready to allow him to divulge that kind of knowledge, but after close examination of potential phenomena in constructed tests, we came to a different solution.

“Is this related to my dream before? Were you the one who showed me Burmecia in ruins!?”

The hesitation in the figure's voice lasted a moment. Yes, it was an accurate recreation of the timeline without any intervention. A slaughter that left only a meager few hundred of your kind left in the world.

“Tell me! If I can do something, if you can tell me how to stop that from happening, then tell me what to do!”

The figure snorted in humor. I see his frustrations, you are a strange person to deal with.

“Don't dance around it, can that nightmare be changed?”

Don't be hasty, friend, if everything goes according to our projected ends, then you will be able to help them.

“Tell me what to do!” Fedrich begged, stepping towards the figure. The cloaked person, however,

jumped onto the fountain and lifted an arm to forestall any other words. Its fingers again held the same strange gem as before, the red sheen a beautiful but foreboding sight. The fountain was no longer red with blood.

This is a special gem that has been handed down through Burmecian royal lineage for several centuries, rumored to contain a powerful magic. The aggressors who will attack Burmecia are after this gem. To hide it within the cities of Burman-kind would bring their destruction, but to give it to them to prevent it would be as disastrous. The cloak fell back to cover the figure's hand. Burmecia will fall either way. Its strength has grown, and with it comes irrational fears of it. For now, be vigilant in your guard of innocent life, and train yourself well to ensure no one will overcome you.

“What else is there to do? Who is attacking Burmecia, can’t I try and stop them before they strike!?”

Be patient, for now this is all you need to concern yourself with.

The figure began to float in the air, its body shimmering and fading into the blackness of the sky.

“Wait! Don’t go yet!” Fedrich pleaded.

I’ll return and further explain when it is necessary. Be vigilant until then, Fedrich...

“Wait, please!” He continued.

Wake up, Fedrich... wake up...

“Fedrich?” A quiet voice repeated.

He opened his eyes slightly, focusing on a smiling face and red locks of hair. Taking a deep breath, he exhaled and opened them wide to see that it was Ruthy, the redhead lying next to him on the bed in the medical hall.

“G’morning.” He gurgled.

“You feeling any better?” She asked.

His expression fell slightly, the dream lingering on his mind. *“...For now I am.”*

Chapter Sixteen

This story belongs to me and my creative mind. However, most of the characters, names, and places all belong to their respective companies, so don't yell at me for copyright infringements! *Remember, Italics represent a person's thoughts or the telling of past events.*

Enjoy...

:Faraway Dreams:

Chapter Sixteen:

“You look horrible.”

Fedrich nodded. His clothing was still stained with blood despite the best efforts to scrub it clean, and his shoulder and tail were tightly bound with bandages. Small parts of his fur were missing, cut away so the healers could tend his wounds. Even his sword was mostly unclean, the doctors forbidding him from moving his arm any more than necessary, preventing him from working on it. “Trust me, I feel much worse.”

“Regardless, after hearing details of Claire’s combat prowess, to have defeated her and come out in your condition is worthy of praise. You have been sticking to my lessons, it seems.”

The Burman grinned weakly. “Yep, they proved useful, although I’ve still got a lot to learn.”

“...I suppose I owe you a debt of gratitude. Without your overzealous dedication to finding Claire, she might have completely disappeared from the public eye. I thank you on behalf of my parents and the whole Gestahl and Fulmen family.”

“It’s okay, Gordan, you don’t need to be so formal.” Fedrich slapped the nobleman’s shoulder. “We’re friends, consider it payment for all the times you helped me.”

“If you insist.” Gordan looked at Ruthy, the redhead standing casually at Fedrich’s side. “Illis sends her heartfelt wishes for your safety and safe return. She adds that poking fun at Gerick is not any fun without you at her side to laugh.”

“Thanks.” Ruthy snickered. “So why are you here, Gordan? You didn’t come all this way just to send word from home, did you?”

“My parents sent me here to assist on the investigation regarding the capture of Claire, and also to retrieve our business Airship, the Diamond Blackjack.” He grinned, leaning against the wall of the medical hall’s common room. “It would seem that with Claire being disposed of, my duties remain mostly accomplished. Already the Gestahl security teams have located and detained the man known as Joachim Frediamin, and soon we will be able to determine if anything the man says is true. His ownership of the family crest ring already makes him the guilty party who ordered uncle Setzer’s assassination.”

“Do you know why he did it?” Fedrich asked.

“He claims to be the bastard child of my great uncle Edvard Gestahl, although no one has stepped forward to second his claim. Even if his claim is true, there is no way that we would allow him to assume control of the business.”

“Fedrich, we need to go.” Ruthy motioned to her pocketwatch. “Sorry, Gordan, but we’ve got to meet a friend to see off for Alexandria.”

“Of course, I would not want to detain you. We will be departing for Lindblum at midday, so please

come to the manor when you are ready.” Gordan bowed lightly, then walked out of the hall.

“You ready?” Ruthy asked, shouldering both her pack and Fedrich’s.

Fedrich nodded. “Ready and able.”

“Hey! You feeling any better?” Leena asked, tossing extra rations into the pouches on her chocobo. The white bird ruffled its feathers at the necessity of all the extra weight, warbling quietly. The two Regulators approach the stall after gazing around at the large number of birds resting on the grassy floor.

“Sore as hell, but up and walking regardless.” Fedrich scratched at his bandaged shoulder. “Thanks again for helping Ruthy and me.”

“Ah, it’s no problem.” She put some final pieces of food into a leather pouch. “Got to make sure I can repay people I owe while I can.”

Fedrich offered the mage a hand. “Let’s just consider it even. I’m not one to keep tabs.”

Leena hesitated a moment, then tossed the pack across the choc's saddle and took his hand in a firm shake. She then slipped something out of her gold bodice and presented it to the Burman. He looked at it oddly, seeing it was a collection of beads similar to the ones on her hat, tied on a short length of rough thread.

“What’s this?” He asked.

“In the study to be a Red Mage, generally the first thing the children learn to do is to tie in magic potential into physical objects. Every mage makes their own outfit from scratch, weaving in a thread of magic power with every thread of fiber.” She took the beads and tucked them into the band around Fedrich’s hat. “These are some of the first things I made in my training, I want you to keep it for some good luck.”

Fedrich smiled warmly. “So now I can use magic or something?”

“Not quite.” The woman knocked his head lightly. “It’s got magic *potential*, so consider it a bonus on your part if you ever get into a fight. I think that one’s a protection charm against magic.”

“I’ll be sure to remember that, thanks a lot.”

Leena looked at the moonlit horizon. “Well, as much as I’d like to dawdle, I’ve got to be on my way to Alexandria.”

Ruthy ran up and gave the elderly woman a brief hug. “You stay safe, Leena.”

“You too.”

Leena stepped up and gave Fedrich a sideways embrace. “You’d better keep out of trouble. I’m not going to come save your ass if it gets handed to you again.”

“Right, right.” He chuckled, returning the motion. “The same to you.”

“Okay.” She muttered, taking hold of the birds reigns and pulling herself onto the saddle. Adjusting her riding dress, she prodded her bird to action, its large feet stamping about in anticipation. Leena looked down at her two friends, allies when she needed them the most, and comrades in a foreign land.

“Well, farewell you two!” Leena smiled and waved. “Let’s go, Polom!”

Her white feathered chocobo warked loudly, trotting out of the stable and into the plains of the

Bentini heights. Kicking up a spout of dirt, the bird took off at a fast pace towards the north and her destination in Alexandria.

“Be sure to write us!” Ruthy shouted after the retreating mage.

The two Regulators stood at the stable doors and watched Leena ride away until the fleeting tail feathers crested a hillock and disappeared from view. Ruthy sighed happily, glad to have been able to help someone get back on their feet.

“I’ll miss her.”

“Me too, but she’s got her own road to take.” Fedrich smiled slightly. “They say that life is full of meetings, partings, and reunions, and that’s what makes it worth the effort.”

“Sage advice.”

Fedrich nodded. “My father told me that when I left home. I think I know what he meant, now.”

“Welcome!” Gordan waved. “I assume you both are ready to return home?”

“Yeah.” Fedrich looked around in amazement. “This place is huge! How do you manage to remember where everything is?”

The nobleman chuckled. “I can attest to that difficulty. I nearly got lost trying to find entrance to the Airship dock.”

“So there’s even a dock in this place?” Ruthy prodded.

“Yes, this manor is not strictly a residential structure. Most of the Gestahl Industry is managed and operated within these very walls. The foundry is in the far back of the manor, management and business discussions are held on the upper floors, and the dock is located opposite the living quarters in the east wing.” Gordan rubbed his hands together. “My duties here have been taken care of for the time being, so we can depart at any time.”

“Let’s go, then!” Ruthy insisted. “I’ve been homesick for days!”

“Okay, follow me.”

The trio walked into a hallway lined with old paintings and potted flowers, artificial lights brightening the hall in tandem with large windows. Outside was a finely maintained courtyard, filled

with a variety of trees and plants. Passing through a large entryway, they began climbing several flights of stairs. Pushing open a heavy door, they stepped onto a large platform at the edge of the manor. Hovering just above was the massive form of an Airship suspended by an even larger blimp, illuminated by several artificial beams of light. Both Fedrich and Ruthy gaped in amazement, and Gordan merely chuckled at their reaction.

“Impressive, is she not?” He asked, motioning up. “It took four years of complicated planning, construction, and spending, but the Diamond Blackjack is finally complete. Uncle Setzer’s dreams and ambitions will finally take flight. It is tragic that he was unable to see it’s maiden voyage.”

“Great Goddess, this thing rivals anything I’ve seen yet.” Fedrich swore, wide eyed.

“It is based off an old model Airship design that uses lighter than air gases trapped in a balloon to hold the craft aloft, thus allowing all the engine’s power to be strictly for propulsion. The few remaining Cargo Class models are the example we took from.” He started towards the ship entryway, a lowered stack of stairs granting access to the inside.

“Come, the interior is just as marvelous as it’s exterior.”

The three walked up the stairs and into the front room, a crewmember taking their packs and stowing them for flight. Gordan then led them down a small hallway and into the center of the ship.

“The hidden jewel of the Blackjack, the betting lounge.”

Before them was an immaculate chamber, the walls covered in a deep red wallpaper, carpeted floors and tables placed throughout. Massive roulette tables were placed in the center, and a bar was against a corner with a full complement of drinks and seats. Both of the side walls were replaced by long stretches of glass windows, allowing for a wide view of the outside world from the thickly padded chairs nearby. Artificial lights illuminated the whole room, and two crystal chandeliers hung from the ceiling to provide a classy atmosphere.

“Uncle Setzer anticipated the future of the business well, he designed this lounge personally and made sure it would fit the tastes of anyone onboard. His clientele would be picked up from anywhere on the continent and brought to Treno for

business talks, offering them a luxurious trip each way to help persuade them to work with him.”

“It’s beautiful.” Ruthy praised, stepping into the room and staring at the expensive furniture. “It’s amazing all this was put into an Airship, you wouldn’t find this anywhere on the earth except a nobleman’s home.”

“Thank you, I am certain that uncle Setzer would appreciate it.” Gordan paused a moment, rising out of the sadness that permeated his thoughts. “Let us proceed to the command room.”

The three walked through the lounge to a door near the bar, pushing it open to reveal a flight of stairs. Ascending them, they walked down another hallway lined with passenger quarters and other necessary facilities, then came to a small stairwell. Climbing further up, this ended at a door that opened up to the center of operations for the Airship. A steering wheel sat at the center, surrounded by levers and switches, pressure gauges, and a plethora of other instruments. Two members of the crew were busy cleaning the windows as Gordan entered.

“Walkers! Tritoch!” The nobleman stated clearly.

The two workers dropped their work and saluted.

“You need something, Sir?” Walkers asked.

“Prepare for liftoff right away, destination being the Fulmen Manor in Lindblum!”

“Yessir!” The two again saluted, then ran to their stations and began their operations.

Gordan nodded, then strode forward to the front windows and looked outside at the dark scenery of the Gestahl manor. He fell into contemplation again, reviewing over his sudden placement into the upper hierarchy of his family business, something he wasn’t prepared for at all. The excitement and honor of the position, however, dulled his fears to an acceptable level. He looked at his side to see both Fedrich and Ruthy admiring the darkened view of the estate.

“Did you find the answers you sought?” Gordan asked after a moment.

“...Yes.” The Burman replied, holding in a sigh. *Except now... now I've got more questions to solve...*

—***End of Part Two***—

The Author Speaks!

Okay, and that brings an end to the second part of the novel! Our poor heroes went through a lot of crap this time, and the following story arc looks to be just as strenuous for them. Will the Regulators stay together? Will Fedrich be able to succeed at his dream of winning the Master Hunter title? Will Gordan leave permanently, and will Illis follow him as well? What does the revival of the prophetic dreams hold in store for our poor Burman hero? Will I stop trying to hype this up now?

Alright, fine.

Like before, I'll be taking a rest from writing to go through the previous chapters and give them a looking over for errors, mistakes, and to unify the formatting that keeps getting mangled by ff.net's document manager. The only problem is that I don't know when I will work on the story. Anyone that's read this ought to know that I'm moving to Washington with my parents, and that'll definitely halt my writing for a few weeks. Even if I get to write right away, I have no idea how long it will be until we get internet access. The move date has been set to about mid June, so I'll give it a healthy month

before you'll see me again, but let's hope it won't be that long.

How's it go, time makes the heart grow fonder?
Ah, whatever. I'll be back in due time, my fellows,
so until then...

Part Three, Chapter One

This story belongs to me and my creative mind. However, most of the characters, names, and places all belong to their respective companies, so don't yell at me for copyright infringements! *Remember, Italics represent a person's thoughts or the telling of past events.*

Enjoy...

:Faraway Dreams:

Part Three: The Things we Blame on Fate

Chapter One:

The number of people in the city had remained the same as previous months despite the cooling winds that came through. As many people that left the city to mark an end to vacations and summer travels came an equal number of people for the Festival of the Hunt. Lindblum, aside from plays and the christening of new Airships, had little to offer it's populace in terms of entertainment. The solstice and seasonal traditions that held a strong position in small towns and villages was lost to the metropolis, the changes throughout the year blotted

out by the artificial walls of the Grand Castle. Lindblum, if anything else, could always claim to have the most moderate weather out of any territory. Whereas Alexandria experienced snow and freezing temperatures, and Burmecia suffered hail and massive windstorms, Lindblum citizens stopped and stared when it simply rained.

The Festival of the Hunt, once a tradition set by the hunters and woodsmen who first claimed the hillock Lindblum sat on as home, was always about pride and honor. The first settlers had to go about choosing their best men, and they took to the woods and killed every last monster and vicious creature that lived there. It was a slaughter of massive scale that took days to complete, but all in the effort to protect the frail humans who sought shelter within the canopy of branches. It was the strength of those warriors that allowed Lindblum to blossom into the city it was.

After time moved on, the Festival was reduced to a mere spectator show to see who among the fighters of the land was strongest. Men and women from all over would travel and take the tests to participate, hoping for a chance to reenact the purging of the once great forest. Monsters from the region would be captured and then let loose in the city, and the

hunters would flood the streets and kill them all to earn their points of valor. Whoever had the most points would be declared the Master Hunter and be given the title officially by the Regent himself, a prize of their choosing prepared. Every year a new Master Hunter was chosen, and the previous bearer would go with the rest to vie for another year as wearer of the title. It was a spectacular event, heroic by some standards, barbaric by others, but never condemned or unwanted.

The current mood of the Festival was energetic at the least, this particular competition being highly anticipated by the number of famous warriors that were rumored to attend. Rivalries, fresh faces, and the large number of participants promised an exciting event to liven the mood of the city to new heights.

“You know... it’s scary how casually I take all this.” Fedrich shook his head. “To anyone else, this would look like the dreams of a madman, the insane. At least you’ve only come to my dreams a few times instead of nightly.”

Consider it a sign that you are capable of remaining open minded about things, and you're welcome.

“Sure.”

Now if you are quite through with idle banter, perhaps you'd be quiet and listen to what I came to tell you.

“I'm listening...” Fedrich nodded, leaning against a wall of the dreamscape street that looked like one in Burmecia. The other person, covered in a large cloak and neutral as to gender or appearance, was sitting on a fountain in an intersection of two streets. A small red gem danced around thin fingers as the figure prepared for the lesson.

You already know what the golem is capable of, and the vast amount of potential they possess together or alone. What you do not know is what they are exactly. The cloaked figure waited a moment, gathering words. Golems are made of mist and pure magic. The mist is like a conductor of magic power, like wood conducts fire and metal does lightning. The golem, a pure creature of magic, is both a blessing and a curse to all who know of it. Any magic the golem uses will be extremely potent, but as things tend to be, it can

bring a person back from death or condemn a healthy man to ashes.

“Sounds pretty bad.” Fedrich commented. “But how can mist and magic combine to make something like that?”

The figure chuckled, a common reaction to the Burman’s questions. That remains a mystery even to me. No known records of that art remain, and it is for the better that it is so.

“Why?”

The golem is far too easy to abuse, much like destruction is simpler than creation. The golem has no emotions, shows no hesitation or pain, and obeys only its creator and those the creator deems worthy. Order it to heal a man, and it will do so until he is healthy and free of injury. Order it to kill a man, and it will do so until it completes the order or dies, not stopping for anything, be it land, sea, unbeatable odds... nothing. With one command it will become the perfect killer, a tool that never tires or slows, a monster unlike any beast alive. One golem on its own can cause much havoc, and as their numbers increase, their destructive potential rises exponentially. An army of golems... The figure let the words trail off,

knowing the demi-human would understand his meaning.

Fedrich whistled in amazement. “Now I know why you are so worried about making sure I know the facts. How could anyone possibly fight an army of those things?”

Our predecessors did. *The figure answered, providing a rare glimpse into it’s identity.*

“Your ancestors?” Fedrich repeated the phrase, curious. “Did someone make them in the past?”

Technically that much is true, the rest I’m not at liberty to say.

Fedrich stood up and looked around the street, the ruins of his hometown and the sight of a possible future where his people were massacred by the golems. The visions were his only clue as to finding a way to stop it from happening, and so he endured the maddening discussions with the phantom whenever it came. In the past he was afraid of the speaker, of the images he saw, but now he was either dulled to them or finally beginning to accept them as something more than nightmares.

“So why—” Fedrich trailed off, seeing the cloaked figure missing from the fountain.

“Nevermind, then.” With a quick motion, he spun on his toes and punched the wall of a random house. The dream shattered apart as he felt no pain, and with that fact, concluded the landscape was a dream and could bring it to an end. He never wanted to spend a minute more in the illusionary ruins of his home than necessary.

Fedrich’s eyes opened slowly, the light of the early morning spilling across the bed and on his face. Grumbling lightly, he rose up and rubbed his eyes clear of sleep, then yawned widely and stretched his limbs. Pulling the bedsheets off his body, he got up and cracked his fingers, kicking life into his legs and toes. Feeling tired still, he made his way to the dresser and lazily picked out his clothes, donning light pants and his durable mythril vest, adding his beaded necklaces and finally the leather wraps for his feet and feathered hat.

“Gods, he couldn’t have picked a better night.” Fedrich figured he only had a few hours of sleep, up into the early morning hours with everyone as they had a rare time to come together. Gordan was perpetually busy running the efforts of the Gestahl Industry that was partially located in Lindblum’s

industrial sector. Macky, too, was tough to get hold of when he seemed locked away in meetings or other work orders. The only people out of everyone he had grown to call his friends were Gerick and the sisters Killjoy, and even Illis was growing distant with her desire to stay by Gordan's side. The Regulators were becoming overburdened with the patrols, and no one was coming to join and assist, making free time a rarity for them.

"Seems like hard times... even with the Festival nearly on us." He picked up his sword, slinging it across his shoulder. "Hopefully it will liven things up again."

Finished combing his hair back with quick finger strokes, the Burman gave his mirror counterpart a smile and left his room in the Regulator Hall. Walking down the short hall, he saw the three remaining Regulators milling around the central table, Gerick taking a deep swig of his precious coffee.

"Morning, everyone."

"You're late again." Gerick's angry tone was proved false at the sight of his wide grin. "I oughta dock your pay."

“Sorry, but it’s not like you’re always awake on time.” Fedrich retorted.

Gerick chuckled, then stood up and stretched his arms out. “Alright, let’s be off.”

The four Regulators all picked up their weapons and headed out towards the plains surrounding the Lindblum walls.

“Here we go...” Gerick grinned. “Plenty of targets coming right for us.”

The other three looked to the edge of the field, seeing a pack of wild Iron Beaks stamping across the plains in their general direction. The trends of monster migrations was apparently late this year, an increase of activity coming in late summer when it was normally seen at its beginning. The bearded man was happy to have more work coming, it meant more money to pay for food and taxes.

“With all these monsters, there’ll be a lot to choose from for the Festival.” Fedrich commented, drawing his sword.

“A lot of money, too, but it doesn’t mean I like it any better.” Illis glared at the beasts. “I’d rather they

not show up at all.”

“Then we’d be out of a job.” Gerick grumbled.

“True... but I’m sure there’s got to be something easier for warriors like us to do than this.”

“Sure there is, but this is somethin’ that only the dedicated peacemakers do. Anyone can be a soldier, it takes a special kinda person ’ta be a Regulator.”

“Another lecture?” Illis stared at the elderly man in annoyance.

“Just a reminder about what we’re ’ere to do.”

“I hate to interrupt, but it looks like they’ve seen us!” Ruthy warned, stringing an arrow.

“Okay!” Gerick swung his hammer out, moving around to get his blood pumping. “It’s showtime, ladies! Let’s go!”

The four Regulators ran to meet the approaching monsters, and the two groups collided in a spray of blood. Gerick’s hammer shattered part of a beak while two swords hacked at exposed flesh and limbs, arrows piercing bodies and hobbling the movement of legs. Screeches and caws of anger sounded across the grass, wings flapping to generate additional movement and taloned feet ripping up the

dirt in hasty motions. A cacophony of sounds rattled through the ears of men and monsters for a long minute, until slowly it lessened, a final choked chirp bringing an end to the chaotic symphony.

Gerick huffed a breath, legs slumping and his hammer supporting his weight. “Heh, that was more like it.”

“Damnation, my arms are killing me.” Illis muttered, wiping her sword free of blood.

“Come on, you’ve only been complaining about work as of late, sis.” Ruthy scolded her elder sibling.

“I’ve got a right to it. Things have only been harder since Gordan left the team to run his family business.”

“You sure it’s that he’s not here to help, or just that he’s not here?” Ruthy arched an eyebrow in curiosity.

Illis growled a warning. “Both, the slacker thinks he can leave me here to do all the work?”

“Come on, you two, enough already.” Gerick insisted. “I’m gonna go deaf just being near ’ya.” He chuckled lightly, swinging his hammer to rest across broad shoulders. A glance to Fedrich made his voice

quit, seeing the Burman standing completely still with his eyes focused on the horizon, ears twitching. Normally the demi-human would be at task to collect usable parts from the monsters, but something broke his routine, and that made the Regulator's leader worried.

“Somethin’ up?” He asked.

“...I don’t know.” Fedrich replied honestly. “There’s something about the air, the wind, something about it has changed.”

A pause. “Come off it, speak it in plain words.”

“Look... before today, there haven’t been a lot of monsters around to fight. Now all of a sudden we see a pack of Iron Beaks walking in the open, and that hasn’t happened in more than a month.” He looked around the field quickly, something tugging at his mind. “It’s not normal, and I don’t like it.”

“Eh, it’s probably nothin’.” Gerick dismissed the feelings with a wave of his hand, moving to a nearby body. “Let’s just take care ‘o this and go home.”

“Just a sec, let me check something.” Fedrich wiped his blade off and sheathed it, then took a step forward and jumped into the sky. The wind tore at his face and made his eyes water, but his vision

cleared up as he came to the apex of his leap. Looking around the field, his eyes caught the movement of figures near the city wall. Although hard to make out, he noticed they were tall and thin, and that there were dozens of them in uniform motion. Gravity pulling him down, he landed uneasily and almost lost his balance, arms out to assist.

“So?” Gerick questioned after bashing a section of beak free of the body.

“Once more.” Fedrich asked, jumping up towards the clouds. Seconds later he landed, and this time he did fall onto his rear without much grace. Scrabbling to his feet, he looked around with panicky eyes. “That must be it...”

“What’s it?” Gerick repeated, annoyance in his tone.

“Vices. There’s a lot of Vices near the city wall, and there coming this way.”

“Oh? Sounds like we’ve got more money to collect.” Gerick grinned, but the expression died as he saw Fedrich’s face show fear rather than determination.

“No, there’s a lot of them, too many.” He paused a moment to take a deep breath. “We need to go, they’re probably coming to see what happened here.”

“Now hold on a—”

“I’m serious, Gerick!” The Burman half shouted. “We should go, I’m not kidding when I say there are too many!”

“What, don’t you trust us?” Illis prodded. “We can take them.”

Fedrich hesitated.

...For now, be vigilant in your guard of innocent life...

“No, I mean yes! I... I don’t doubt any of you, but I honestly think we’d be in serious trouble if we stay and fight!” Fedrich began to move away from the fresh corpses. “Gerick, if you’re concerned about the kills, let’s at least back off and let them pass.”

Gerick scrunched up his face, but nodded after a moment. “Alright, if it spooks you that much, we’ll let ’em by. Let’s go!”

The four ran upwards towards a collection of tall and convoluted hills, ducking through valleys and

thick shrubs until they couldn't see the grassy fields. Motioning with his hand, Gerick ordered them topside, and the four climbed up a hill until they rested on the top, hidden from obvious view but afforded a wide range of surveillance. The sunlight made it difficult to see clearly, but Fedrich was determined to keep his eyes on the approaching creatures.

"Ruthy, you've got better eyes, can you see them?"

The redhead paused a moment, putting a hand up as brown orbs flicked back and forth. Long moment later a nervous whine came out of her throat. "Yeah, you were right." She pointed towards the base of the hills just north of the battlefield. "There, almost at them."

The others looked hard at the place she indicated, able to see numerous shapes walking at the edge of the field, seemingly on their own patrol around the city walls. The numbers were vague, but at least thirty of them were in constant view, all holding the clawlike swords that was the trademark of warrior Vice. The humanlike monsters came upon the battlefield, and they immediately went defensive, collecting in a circular group and investigating the

immediate area. The sword bearing Vice looked around the nearby hills, and the few Vice holding staves merely stood in the center and scanned the horizon. Several agonizing minutes later, the Vices seemed satisfied with their work and continued moving on.

Fedrich let go of held in breath. “Good.”

“Hells, though, I’ve never seen so many of ‘em together in a long time.” Gerick rubbed his beard. “It’s bad, whatever they’ve got.”

“What’s bad?”

“Vices normally stick ‘ta small packs, never more’n a dozen. The only exception is when somethin’ gets them on edge, the beasties are damned smart enough to know about strength ‘n numbers.” The elder man chuckled. “I remember a time back in the Guard, the Vice’s all came together in a single group. Hundreds ‘o them together, all ‘cause we’d been trying to flush them outta the mountains ‘n northwestern ranges. The Regent actually made a declaration against ‘em, so we all went out an’ had a war to break them up.”

“How did it go?” Ruthy asked.

Gerick's expression fell. "Vice's may be monsters, but they got smarts that scare me about fightin'. We managed 'ta push them into a forest near Midvalley, but the bastards would use sneak attacks on us. From outta nowhere they'd attack, take a few men a day until we couldn't stand 'ta stay anymore." He looked towards Fedrich with a curious expression. "Did 'ya know, at first humans thought yer kind were monsters? Tall and all gangly, it was until your people got smart 'n tried talkin' things out did we think otherwise. Fer all we know... Vice's could be the same. Just like humans, but different lookin' and unable to talk, or something, 'cause they can be damned smart when they have the time."

"Enough, you're giving me material for nightmares, there." Illis snorted, rubbing her nose. "Vice's are just freakish demons, they can't possibly be *human* like any of us."

"I wouldn't say one way or another fer sure." Gerick insisted.

"Forget about it, they've gone." Fedrich motioned. "We can get our pay now."

"Alright." He stood up slowly, wiping his forehead. "Let's be goin', you three."

“So! Looks like you’ve found where they’ve been hidin’!” Corban laughed, straining to lift the final sum of beak scards onto his scale. He then added in numerous counterweights, carefully checking to see when it evened out.

Gerick chuckled as well. “You could say that.”

“Fifty three kilos speaks fer itself, twenty eight a bit, so it comes to...” He took up a pencil, thick fingers scribbling down numbers in a worn book. “Fourteen hundred eighty four Gil! Quite a haul.”

“So what’s that between us four?”

“Lessee...” More writing, muttered curses for the want of proper numbers. “Three hundred seventy?”

“Good enough fer me.” Gerick nodded, accepting the heavy load of coins into his hands. “You haven’t heard anythin’ about the monsters, have ‘ya?”

“Nothin’ important, no.”

“Well, you let anyone who comes here know that those damned Vices are gatherin’ up again, and ‘ta stay careful of ‘em. We ran into a big ’ol group of them, and even Fedrich here was worried white about fightin’ them.”

“Oh? Musta been tough lookers to do that!” He glanced at the aforementioned Burman. “Who’d ever think you’d be cautious in battle, the guy who goes head on with dragons!”

“Let’s say that I’m learning to keep out of things I can’t handle.” Fedrich meekly avoided the man’s questioning gaze.

“I’ll keep that on hand, then. You all have a good day, now!”

“We will!” Ruthy piped in as the foursome left the Hide Shop and into the main street of the Business District.

The late afternoon crowds were thicker than normal, many of them bearing foreign clothing and gawking at the city’s dominating stature. Fedrich chuckled to himself, recalling that just four months prior he too was walking around in a daze at the immense scale of the city’s walls and buildings. The things he experienced, the ups and downs of his work and life, made him feel years older than when he first stood at the entrance to the Grand Castle city.

It feels like it’s been ages since I’ve first arrived. Stumbling onto the Regulators, entering into a fight

with the so named Knight of Fire, Elric, and his quest to take Illis and Ruthy back to their hometown. Gordan and the loss of his uncle, and the entire betrayal by Claire and the hunt for her. Then there's all the training with Gordan and Illis, getting burnt and cut and bruised. Goddess Rei... I've done more here than I'd have done in decades back home! Father would be surprised to see what I've gone through. So much for simply training for the Festival...

“Fedrich!”

“Eh?” He focused back into reality, seeing Illis staring at him. “Yes?”

“I said goodnight, and don’t forget, the trials for the Festival start at the end of the week.”

“Of course, I already registered my name.” The Burman paused a moment. “You’re turning in already?”

“Yeah, I could sleep through the rest of the month right now, staying up most of the night and then having to go on patrols.” She sighed and shook her head. “It’s tough enough with the work, now I can hardly see Gordan during daylight hours.”

“At least you can see him, he’s always busy running the business whenever Ruthy or I try and stop by.” Fedrich smirked lightly. “I guess you’re the exception to the saying business before pleasure.”

Illis snorted a laugh. “He knows what’s more worth his time. Goodnight.”

“G’night.”

“I’ll be going to bed, too, so see you both tomorrow!” Ruthy added, skipping over to her sister’s side.

“Right! See you both tomorrow!” Gerick waved them off, then stretched his arms until his joints popped. Exhaling contently, he slapped Fedrich’s back and chuckled. “So yer finally gettin’ a chance to attain your goal. You think you’ll win it?”

Fedrich nodded with a cocky grin. “Even if I broke both legs I’d still get second place.”

“That’s the spirit! Take as much time as ’ya need to get ready, it’ll be a tough three days for you.”

“Thanks again, Gerick... for everything. I’d never have gotten this far without your help.” Fedrich gave the elder man a warm smile.

“Ach, it’s nothin’ I wouldn’t do for anyone.” He waved the compliment off. “You just win it and make us all proud, got it?”

“I will.”

The Author Speaks!

Just a quick little note for everyone. The move, although full of problems from cats acting like drunks and missing furniture to my basement bedroom being damp, went just fine.

Two bits of information need to be told. The lesser of them, we no longer have AOL as our browser, so you won’t see me as often on AIM as before. Concerns and critiques can be sent by email still to my yahoo account on my bio page. The greater of them, I’m still helping to unpack stuff, so I’ll be busy still for another month at the rate we’re going. Hopefully it won’t impede on my writing time, but don’t be worried if more delays occur.

The Author is **IN**, and it’s good to be back!

Chapter Two

This story belongs to me and my creative mind. However, most of the characters, names, and places all belong to their respective companies, so don't yell at me for copyright infringements! *Remember, Italics represent a person's thoughts or the telling of past events.*

Enjoy...

:Faraway Dreams:

Chapter Two:

“Funny to see you up so early, Fedrich.” Macky commented after taking a swig of coffee.

Fedrich looked back from his perch at the edge of the square, seeing the stocky figure take a place nearby. His eyes looked ringed with blackness, and his appearance was more than enough to show that he had another all night meeting despite the earlier start. “Another late session?”

A nod. “It’s beyond logic. I get the meeting started at seven, and it lasts until three! They never last that long, but everyone seemed perfectly content

to argue and bicker all night long. The Gods must not be done amusing themselves with me.”

“At least you don’t have to deal with early morning patrols around the city.” Fedrich muttered, his own complaints echoing in his mind.

“Trust me, I’d rather do that. I’m tempted to go kill the bastards as it is, at least that way I’d get paid for it.”

The two snickered for a short moment, then fell to silence. Fedrich took a long look at the walls, seeing the warm glow of the sun beginning to brighten the skies. Getting up before dawn was something he normally despised, but being able to witness the sunrise was looking to be worth the lost sleep.

“So what’s up?”

Fedrich looked back to the tired man. “Not much. I just woke up for some reason, and it’s not even light yet. Normally I’m never awake this early, so I figured I might as well watch the sunrise.”

Macky grinned knowingly. “Ah, the hypnotic taste of seeing the world wake up before your eyes. It’s a rare treat to have, not just anyone can appreciate it.” He leaned heavily on the railing.

“Being able to see everyone get up, starting their days before stress and problems have a chance to screw things up, it’s calming. Watching the sun come up bit by bit, you could almost get lost in your thoughts. It’s like a fleeting sense of what paradise must be, a place where nothing can go wrong.”

Fedrich clapped his hands weakly. “Bravo. Getting poetic, are we?”

A laugh. “Inspired is more like it, I’m hardly an artist.”

“Well you certainly sounded like one. Maybe staying up all night works to your benefit.”

“That’s not funny. I’d rather sleep.”

“Agreed.”

Macky stood up and stretched his arms up, tilting his head until it gave a satisfactory crack. He downed his coffee, then spun the cup around his fingers. “You heard anything about the Hunters for the Festival?”

“Not really, just that a previous Master Hunter was trying out again.” Fedrich glanced to Macky. “Why?”

“Well, this is just rumors, friend of a friend’s brother’s uncle-in-law’s accuracy, that there are a lot of key players in this Festival. The previous titleholder must be Ivan Theend, a local merchant with a taste for spearing whatever pisses him off. There’s also Belna, Taggert, Mikal, and Flaure just to name some other favorites. What’s suspicious is that a mercenary from Treno is coming, one that’s earned a reputation as being the biggest bitch around.”

“What’s odd about that?”

“Mercenaries tend not to get into these kinda things, it doesn’t pay well. This mercenary happens to hold a sizeable warrant on her head, so it would be madness for her to join.” He held up his hand to forestall Fedrich’s next question. “Her name’s Lani, the quote unquote most beautiful bandit Lani.”

“Lani...” Fedrich repeated the name, unable to recall hearing anything about the woman. “So why is it odd for her to enter? She might just be after a big reward, or she might not have anything else to do.”

“Because she has a fat sack of Gil hanging over her head, remember? The rumor most vague, but

most reasonable, is that she's here because someone paid her to come."

Fedrich stood up, fur ruffled. "Paid to do something to affect the Festival..."

"A lot of money rides on who the winner is and the ranks below. Lindblum doesn't like it, but millions of Gil are won and lost by gamblers from across the continent on bets for the Festival. Someone hiring Lani to rig it in their favor sounds like a good idea, the risk alone makes it almost impossible to prove in court, being able to get away with it would be tougher."

The Burman sighed, rubbing his hands together to ward off the morning chill. "Figures this would happen, even the Festival of the Hunt is going to end up being more trouble for me."

Macky eyed the Regulator. "Who said anything about you havin' to stop her?"

"Well, who else is going to? You don't want the Festival to be ruined because of one person, do you?"

"So you're going to take on the task? It's just rumors, Fedrich, nothing more. It could just be random threats to scare people one way or another.

You don't have to do more than win the thing, leave it up to the guards to fix.”

“I don't think I can do that, Macky.”

The tired man laughed to himself. “You're worse about honor than Gordan is.”

“A Dragon Knight must do all that he can to ensure that the law is upheld, be it from his own nation or any other.” Fedrich quoted from the brief list of Knight's mottos that he knew. “It's duty to do what I can to stop this Lani from doing any harm.”

“Except you forget that you're no knight.” Macky rubbed his hair. “But not that you care, eh? You've hunted down criminals across the continent, this would be simple in comparison.”

“Simple...” A grin creased his lips. “Goddess, it wouldn't be too much to ask for something simple.”

“You'd think so, but it's the difficult things that make life interesting.” Macky yawned, blinking weariness away. “I'm gonna get more coffee. Want any?”

“No thanks, I should be going.” Fedrich tugged his hat down and started towards the Aircabs. “I've got some shopping to do.”

“Then I’ll see you around, and good luck on the opening trials.”

“Right. See ya.”

“Welcome, welcome! How can I help you?”

Fedrich grinned. “Good morning. I’d like to take a look at some of your swords.”

“What kind are you thinkin’ of? Long, short, serrated, I’ve got more than anyone else could boast of!”

“Short, preferably Burmecian forged.”

“Ah, shoulda known right off.” The hulking demi-human went to one of the many racks behind his counter, picking blades at random and setting them on the surface with utmost care. ‘I’ve got your standard Guard issue, mass forged but good quality. There are also some replicas of the older style common to the unified Burmecian age. Ah! Here’s a few worth a looking over, newest of the new designs straight from the King’s own armory!’ With great pride, he arranged three short swords onto the table. “These are some ’o the best works I’ve seen outta

Burmecia in years, lad, each a regular masterpiece in my opinion.”

Fedrich took up one of the weapons, noting that it was lighter than it looked to be, and was of a unique shape. Instead of a simple crossbar, the hilt was angled upwards as if made to catch a falling sword rather than repel it. The blade itself had an intricate design stained in the metal, a dragon roaring at invisible foes. He set it back, and took notice that the two other short swords were fashioned with the same idea, a few changed and additions, but otherwise the same as the blade he carried.

“They do look detailed, but what makes them better than any other?”

Dragoos leaned closer, excitedly picking up a sword and staring at it. “Better? Lad, if what I tried with ‘em makes the cut, then these make anythin’ else nothing more than toys! Here, I’ll show you exactly what my meaning is!”

The gruff merchant stepped to the back counter, rummaging through layers of papers and spent metal pieces. Eventually his hand came out with a jingle of thick chain rings. He tugged it repeatedly, then tossed it on the table and straightened it out to a line.

He then drew a short sword from a rack and gripped it tight.

“Now pay attention, lad! A normal sword like yours or mine wouldn’t do so much as nick this chain. See here!” He raised his arm, and with a powerful grunt, he brought the sword down on the chain with a crack of wood and metal. Raising it, the chain had only a slight indent on it and the blade itself bore a mark of the same type.

“Now here’s that sword you don’t think is any better!” With an equal amount of effort, he swung down, cut through the chain, and buried the sword partly into the wood counter.

Fedrich’s eyes widened at the sight, and Dragoos smiled. “There’s a little truth to everythin’.”

“That was... amazing.” Fedrich took a deep breath. “Goddess, that’s one hell of a sword!”

“A masterpiece, looks and action both.” Dragoos beamed with pride.

“How much would that sell for? You could set any price and get away with it!”

“You speak truer words than most people, lad, and believe me, the temptation is high and mighty to

resist. ‘Owever, Dragoos keeps a reputation as being a fair and decent man in a world of greedy merchants with silver tongues. I bought each of these fine swords at four thousand each, straight from the weaponmasters of Burmecia’s guard, and I’m willin’ to part with ’em for five thousand.”

With a whish of leather against cloth, Fedrich put his sword on the table with a loud thump. “My sword, my livelihood, will stay right here until I come back with the money for that blade. You sold it to me for two thousand Gil several months back, would you buy it off me for fifteen hundred?”

Dragoos took the sword from the sheath and looked it over. “Seems in good enough condition...”

“Then I’ll be back before you have time to miss me!” With a clatter of steps, the Burman pushed through the door and took off into the air as if he could fly.

Fedrich was glad it was as early as it was, making little trouble to leapfrog across the streets and squares of the Business District. What would be twenty minutes in the commercial center of Lindblum became six, and minus the constant speed of the Aircab, he made it back to the Hall in equally fast time. Everyone had departed for the morning

patrol, which he was excused from to prepare for the Festival, leaving the rooms empty. Skidding into his bedroom, he opened his dresser and shoved aside folded clothes until he found his stash of Gil beneath. Pulling the sack out, he gave quick blessing to his parents for instilling a frugal mindset in his youth. Pocketing the saved money, he left the Hall and sped back towards the business streets and eventually to the waiting eyes of Dragoos.

“Back!” Fedrich exclaimed, heaving for air.

A wide-eyed glance. “Lad, if you went all the way to the Theater streets for that, then you must’ve set some records!”

“Worth the effort.” He inhaled, then gathered himself. “Right. You’ll take my sword for fifteen hundred?”

“Sure.”

“Then here’s the rest.” He took the pouch and emptied it onto the table, coins skipping about and flashing large denominations. “There’s more than enough, but all you need is thirty five hundred.” Fingers quickly divided coins apart, stacking them until the proper amount was in one pile and the rest slid back into the pouch.

“Okay, payment due and made. Many thanks and blessing on you, lad, you’ve been a good customer!” He took the blade and reversed it. “Here, take a swing at the chain, get a *feel* for what I mean.”

Fedrich took the sword, light weight confidant in his palm. He leveled his feet, and with a quick up and down motion, split the length of chain apart once more, adding a second groove into the tabletop. A smile stretched his lips as far as they would go, a chuckle from his throat. “Goddess, what a weapon. How did they make it so strong?”

“I believe it’s from good materials and good blacksmiths, but that Burmecian went on about havin’ the elders and Dragon Knights themselves offering prayers to the spirit of the weapons. He said that it’s the strength of the dragons that make it what it is, not any fancy forging tricks.”

“Blessed with the strength of dragons...” Fedrich mused, looking the sword over. The stain of a proud and fearsome dragon was on either side, the bottom of the grip looking like the sharp point of a dragon’s horn.

“Either way, it’s a sword unlike anything else out there. You take care of it, lad, it’ll give you decades of use with the right treatment.”

“I’ll keep it sparkling. Thank you very much.”

“You’re welcome. Have a fine day!”

Fedrich’s feet touched the stone ground for only a brief second as he propelled himself further up. A single leap sent him far into the open, and with a quick thought, his hand reached out and took a firm grip of a rail bordering the street. Falling to gravity, he tugged himself up and dusted his hands off. His fur bristled in the cold, and Fedrich actually buttoned his vest up against the chill, a first since his stay within the city walls. The effort did little good to trap the heat of his body, so he shivered and crossed his arms with a grumble.

He looked up, and saw the top of the Grand Castle’s walls within jumping distance. His logical half protested the waste of time and effort, but he huffed a breath and ignored it.

“It’ll be worth it.” He muttered quietly.

Checking the immediate footholds, Fedrich jumped up and landed on the thin stretch of roofing that bordered the walls. Another minor leap and he took hold of the top of the wall, letting himself hang

for a moment in sweetening anticipation. Pulling his thin body up, he settled into a crouch, keeping his eyes to the stone below. Standing slowly, he raised his head towards the east and opened his eyes to the brightening view.

The expanse of the world entered his green eyes, and his body quaked at the magnificence of it.

The morning currents were fresh, cold drifts of wind wafting across the air in gentle movements. The sun was just barely above the horizon, long rays of light staining the world a plethora of reds and oranges. Clouds in the sky were alit in a fiery brilliance, puffy forms resting idly across the expanse of the vast ocean and plains beneath Lindblum's gaze. Stars winked silently in the dark blue sky, fading away as the mother sun woke from a fitful rest. Forests spread like vast quilts across the land, deep green patches threaded in ample portions on the bright green and yellow plains. The land was shrouded in a thin layer of mist, both the known and unknown, making everything appear as if it was completely still. The sun alone moved, all other things at a pause as it woke to a new day.

Fedrich felt shivers of a different kind race along his spine, like he was witness to a vast secret of

unimaginable power. He felt like he was floating, almost, looking down upon the whole of existence from his perch on the wall. Everything was distant and beautiful, a sight that humbled him as memories of the day bubbled beneath his consciousness. What problems in his life could compare to the vast, unending horizon of the waking world?

“Macky, you were right.” He smiled, then chuckled at his reaction. “It is like watching a brief moment of life in paradise.”

Fedrich tugged idly at his vest, trying to get it seated properly on his shoulders. His hurried rush to the grounds of the royal castle itself made just about everything on his person get tangled and misplaced. Fingers went into his pocket and pulled out a thick paper card, his name and a machine printed number on one side, the seal of the Regency on the other.

“Now gentlemen!” A voice boomed out from the center of the courtyard, a reedy looking man standing on a raised wood platform erected there. “If I may have your attention! First, I wish to congratulate all of you for assuming the risks and dangers that signify this contest. It takes an

extraordinary man to summon the courage to run with the beasts of the land and to do battle with them. His honor, Regent Cid IX, also adds his personal praise and wishes you all the best of skill.”

Fedrich paid little attention to the speaker, ears more than able to pick up the words without need for his concentration. He looked around at the other participants, eyeing those that looked serious about the Festival and of combat. Although he didn’t know what monsters would be loosed upon the city, he knew that the strengths of the Hunters would be just as important to judge.

“All participants of the Festival have been handed a ticket to signify their entrance, and as you are aware, have been gathered in similar places as these to perform the trials. There are a total of seven hundred eighty four warriors in this years Festival, a large number not seen in many seasons! You warriors here will engage in individual fights, and the victors of each battle will move on to the next tier of combat. After achieving four victories over your competitors, each one more suited than the last, will you finally achieve the title of Hunter!”

The man raised his arms to gather attention. “The rules of combat are simple! Each warrior may use a

single weapon for the entire Festival and only that weapon. To win the battle, your opponent must declare defeat and disqualification by calling out mercy or be rendered unconscious. If, during the battle, you or the judge determine that a wound is too serious to allow you to go on, then you shall be disqualified. If a death occurs in the battle, as it very well can happen, then the warrior who delivered the blow will be disqualified and possibly tried in court if it so warrants. Each battle will last for only five minutes, and if a victor has not been determined, then one shall be by the number of wounds visible as dictated by the judge.”

“Does anyone here need the rules repeated for them?”

Silence.

The man smiled widely. “Then let the competitions begin!”

Fedrich stifled a yawn as weariness edged in on his mind. He had already watched most of the battles, and so far was impressed with only a handful of them. The others were not unsuited, but lacked the proper experience that the rigors of the Festival demanded of them.

“Calling numbers five hundred eighty three and eight four, warriors Fedrich and Andren!” The judge announced.

Fedrich’s senses came alive at the call, and he stepped forward to the center of the courtyard and onto the wooden platform. The judge, dressed in the finest of clothes and wearing oversized spectacles, waved them to his side. He looked to his opponent, a massive hulk of a man that rivaled the size of most demi-humans, hands enclosed in sparking metal gloves. The judge checked their cards to verify their names, and then he led them to a five pace distance apart.

“Alright, warriors, engage!”

“Get ready, boy, for my fury!” Andren boasted.

Fedrich let a smirk touch his lips. “I quake in your presence.”

“Oh, so you think you’re really hot stuff, eh?” Andren laughed, circling the stage. “I’ve seen six years in these fights, and I doubt that some first timer is gonna outdo me.”

“Well, there’s always a first for everything, right?” Fedrich followed his steps to keep him at bay.

Andren scowled. “Trust me, this isn’t your time!”

The brutish man dashed forward, his gauntlet encased fists raises high as he prepared to strike. Fedrich jumped back to avoid the man’s first punch, then continued to jump back to dodge each one following. He then leapt up and kicked a foot out to strike the man’s face, clawed toes lacerating his face. Andren growled in pain, putting a hand to his cheek.

“You know, I think it *is* my time.” Fedrich allowed himself a measure of taunting. “You may be strong, but if you can’t hit your enemy, it isn’t worth much anything.”

“Oh, I’m just getting warmed up!” The brawler declared.

Again he charged towards Fedrich, and the Burman was quick to jump out of his punches and kicks, moving back towards the center. However, Andren pulled out something from his vest and threw it at the Burman. A knot of rope and weights unraveled in the air and wrapped itself around the Burman’s legs, stopping him from jumping back. Andren then used the extra time and lashed out with his metal encased fist, connecting with the Burman’s chest to draw a gasp from him. Another punch

against his ribs sent the Burman stumbling back, his face wide with pain as he tried to maintain balance.

“You see? Just because you think you’ve done good doesn’t mean you don’t have a superior!”

“I’m not done yet!” Fedrich spat, finally drawing his sword out and slashing the rope binding his thin legs.

Standing quickly, the Burman leapt forward and swung his blade out with intent to give the man a scar to remember. The behemoth merely raised up a hand and caught the blade in his palm, metal gauntlets holding up to the force of the strike. Fedrich pulled back in time to avoid yet another punch and tried his best to attack despite being unable to find an opening. For a long minute, the two warriors fought between blocking one’s attacks and making their own, each unable to connect with the other. Andren, his face red with anger, finally let the Burman’s blade connect with his hand before closing his fingers over it, trapping the weapon.

“Heh heh, whatcha gonna do without your little butter-knife!?”

With a firm pull, the man yanked the blade free of Fedrich’s hand and tossed it behind him, then

proceeded to charge the demi-human. Fedrich dodged left and right, knowing that he wouldn't be able to match the man's power without his sword.

Come on, improvise, improvise!

Fedrich curled his fingers into fists, then waited for Andren make a mistake. Finding an opening, the Burman used his quick feet to jump in and punch the man across his jaw. The brawler shrugged the blow off, then backhanded the Regulator across his own face with greater results.

Rei's suffering, this isn't good! I can barely keep up this pace with my chest hurting so badly...

Fedrich felt blood well up in his mouth, his tongue victim to the teeth that cut it. Cursing silently, he watched as the man drew his fist back to again deliver a powerful strike. Fedrich ducked around the attack, then curled his fingers and lashed out quickly, claws raking across the man's face to add to his visible wounds.

“Two and a half minutes, gentleman!” The judge declared, his eyes glued to his wristwatch.

Fedrich spat out a mouthful of blood once he jumped out of the brawler's reach, trying to think of a way to overcome the man's stronger body.

Damn, this isn't good. He's just too strong to be hurt by little scratches...

The brute cracked his knuckles, then again checked his face to feel the blood smeared on it. Fedrich then noticed something that he could use, something that he should have understood right away. Andren came racing forward, and Fedrich watched as his bulk made his charge much slower and time consuming.

Using his weight against him... yes, it could work!

The demi-human waiting for the man to come, and he ducked down as his metal fists came racing for his head. The Burman then grabbed the man's leg tightly, straining his own legs as he stood up and forced the brawler onto his face. Fedrich then leapt up into the air as high as he could, hoping Andren didn't notice.

Andren stood up and looked around, confused as he couldn't find his opponent anywhere in the platform arena. The man looked up casually, and his face paled as he saw the Burman's thin form drop out of the sky and land squarely on his broad shoulders. The force of Fedrich's fall caused the man's legs to collapse, spilling the man forward to

have his skull again slam into the ground, this time consciousness fleeing from his rattled head.

Fedrich leapt off the man's body and readied himself for battle, but Andren didn't rise to the occasion. The judge entered the arena and checked the brawler, turning the man over and seeing his eyes rolled back into his head. He waited a second to see if Andren would come around, but as he gave no response, the watch closed.

"Warrior Andren has been rendered unconscious! Warrior Fedrich is the winner of the first round with a time of three minutes and eight seconds!"

The men present applauded as a sign of manners, but Fedrich could see on each face the registering of a foe to keep an eye one. He walked to the edge of the platform and hopped down, looking around for his discarded sword. Seeing it lying on a patch of tall grass, he approached to pick it up as another hand gathered it. He followed the hand up, over a sleeve of voluminous material, a shoulders length of brown hair, and to a face of milky complexion.

"Yours, I presume?" The girl lifted it to him, hilt first.

“Yes. Thank you.” He added politely, receiving the blade and sheathing it.

“You did well back there, what profession do you claim?”

“I’m a member of the Regulators.”

“Oh,” She mouthed, resting her fingers on her chin. “I see. Then that would explain your... unorthodox methods of combat.”

Fedrich arched an eyebrow, noticing that the girl looked even younger than Ruthy. “Unorthodox?”

The girl laughed lightly. “Take no offense, please, I meant nothing by it.” She turned to leave, silken robes swirling around her legs.

“Who are you? If I might ask, of course.” Fedrich figured the girl wasn’t merely acting formal, and he tried to maintain his own civil language. “I’m Fedrich Castor.”

She looked back a moment with unsettling amber eyes, pace not slackening. “Flaure Highguard.”

Fedrich felt a spark run up his spine. *She’s Flaure? The same woman that Macky said was a favored Hunter in the Festival? How could that girl*

be a warrior, she looks barely old enough to be able to use a weapon effectively...

The girl disappeared into the crowd, the judge ordered the call for battle, and Fedrich smiled despite himself.

Chapter Three

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Enjoy...

:Faraway Dreams:

Chapter Three:

Fedrich slumped up against a wall, exhaustion making his joints irritable and his muscles all but useless. The second round of eliminations for the Festival was just as harsh as the first, but this time he could see that every warrior had impressive skill. No longer was the winning based partly on chance, everything now was on nothing but skill and experience, where beginners luck had no place. The last rays of the sun spilled onto the castle walls, bathing the stone in deep shades of crimson and orange.

This sword was no help at all... He stared at the reflective surface, trying to see some visible fault. Why won't it cut like it did? Andren's gloves and Saril's staff both stopped it. Why?

No answers came to mind, and the sword didn't look any worse for wear. The lethal edge was sharp as before, but the miracles it performed at Dragoos' shop weren't happening in the battlefield. He carefully tapped his finger on the tip, wincing as it cut the digit and welled up with a drop of blood. Wiping it on his pants leg, he huffed in frustration and instead focused on catching his breath and ability to stand without aid.

"You appear perplexed." A voice came from the side.

Fedrich looked up, seeing the flowing robes of a familiar girl, Flaure. She gave a weak smile, arms folded behind her back and her hair tied back.

"Hello." Fedrich started, moving to stand.

"Might I take a look at your sword?" Flaure asked.

The Regulator paused a moment, but lifted the blade to her. She took it gently, then placed it before her eyes and looked it over with the precise motions

of a master smith. Tilting it from side to side, she murmured to herself, then looked up at Fedrich's eyes. Her smile widened.

"Your actions during the trial, they reflected expertise in the art of swordplay, but showed disdain for the weapon's ability." She lowered the blade. "You have a face that reads as easily as a textbook. The sword doesn't meet with your expectations, and only because you set too high a standard for it to meet."

Fedrich's eyes widened as she spoke, surprised that she was able to read so much about his thoughts only from watching how he fought. With an easy motion, she reversed the sword and offered it back to him.

"Andren's gloves were made of adamantium metal, nearly indestructible and most certainly able to withstand a strike from a sword. Saril's staff was made of solid mythril, and if you looked carefully, had several deep cuts in the surface from your attacks at the end of the duel. Despite whatever results you gained with this blade in previous bouts, you are facing equals in this arena, both in skill and in quality weapons." Flaure's smile faded, leaving a professional expression. "Don't think the sword will

do all the work for you. By simple observational calculations, as your current self, you stand little chance of succeeding tomorrow's trial."

"Thank you, for the... advice." Fedrich sheathed the blade while nodding. "How can you tell all that?"

"I make it my business to see these things." She turned to leave, walking to the exit for the city proper.

Fedrich didn't respond to her last words, watching as she faded into the departing crowds for the Aircab stations. He looked down at his sword, eyes tracing over the hilt and the V-shaped crossguard. It clicked in his head that any warrior who entered the Festival was as likely to own an impressive weapon as he was. Only the best of warriors were able to enter the Festival, so it reasoned that only the best equipment would suffice for them.

I wonder how many of these warriors bought their equipment from Dragoos, or from better dealers? And now I've got people telling me I'm not good enough to win. I guess things won't be getting any easier for me...

Walking slowly through the dimming streets of the Industrial District did little to help Fedrich's sore legs, but having the chance to let his mind wander was relaxing enough. The absolute focus he needed in both fights was a surprise to him, used to only the predictable and cumbersome movements of monsters in the plains. This was a new level of battle, a peak that he had only been on a few times before when against Elric and Claire. He knew that he would have to acclimate to the rigors of fighting equally skilled opponents, if not those with greater skill than his own.

“This really will be the defining moment...” He murmured, letting the words roll off his tongue lazily. “All or nothing, win or lose, nothing inbetween...”

Lamps started to flicker to life, illuminating the streets from the darkness of nightfall. Most everyone was already at home or leaving from the few taverns still open, all manners of business done for the day. Passing through the darkened paths would be unnerving for most people, but Fedrich’s nerves were still edged with adrenaline. If anyone tried to mug him, he smirked, they’d find themselves rapidly put down with their skin flayed off.

Fortunately, Fedrich arrived at his destination without any trouble. The massive wrought-iron gates of the Fulmen manor looked even more intimidating in the night, but he paid them little attention and stepped up to them. Two guards were standing on the inside courtyard, both armed with compact crossbows.

“Excuse me?” Fedrich started, catching their attention.

“What do you want?” One guard demanded, annoyed.

“I’d like to talk with Gordan if he’s around, could you see if he’s busy?”

The first guard laughed. “Try another one, kid.”

Fedrich frowned. “He’s a member of the Regulators, and so am I, and I was in this very manor when Setzer Gestahl was assassinated by a thief named Riyu, and I was the one who caught his accomplice named Claire in Treno not but a week later and flew back here on the company Airship named the Diamond Blackjack!”

The first guard looked flustered at the long statement, but the second stepped up. “What’s your name?”

“Fedrich Castor.” The Burman huffed. “Look, could one of you just go inside and ask one of the servants to check on him? He’ll recognize my name and we’ll get an answer and leave this arguing for another day.”

The first sighed. “I’ll do it if you’ll be quiet and leave when he gives you the boot.”

“Fine by me.”

The guard took a casual pace to the manor proper, and Fedrich leaned against the gates to await the answer. Obviously Gordan had hired new security, the previous attendants knew his face and let him in whenever he came by to visit. It was a full ten minutes later when the guard came jogging back, unlocking the gate with an embarrassed face.

“Sorry about the trouble. He’s waiting in the front room.”

“No problem.” Fedrich walked past him with a knowing smile, heading for the massive double doors ahead.

The manor was well lit, artificial lamplight shining across most of the grass near the actual building and every window illuminated from within under muted colors of drapes. A servant girl was

standing at the double doors, holding them open and waiting for him to enter. Several strides took him up the stairs and through the passage, eyes wincing a second as they were bombarded by even brighter lights. Eventually he saw Gordan reclining in one of many chairs surrounding a central table, the noblemen waving him closer.

“Good evening, Fedrich! Please, have a seat.” He waited until the Burman was properly rested, sipping at a glass of water. “Care for a drink?”

“No thanks.”

“Okay.” He shifted position. “So what brings you here tonight, friend?”

Fedrich took a breath. “I just feel like talking. It’s been a hard day.”

“Evidently. Is it because of the Festival?”

A long pause.

“It is, then.” Gordan set the glass aside and leaned forward, cupping his chin with his fingers. “Something about you speaks of unforeseen difficulties.”

“It’s not that it’s difficult, just demanding!” Fedrich defended himself casually. “I’m just...

worried about tomorrow. The two warriors I fought today both gave me a hard time, and it's only going to get worse. Plus there's this girl, she keeps talking to me and giving me advice.”

“By advice I assume you mean descriptions of weaknesses you were not aware of.”

A nod. “Yes.”

“Well, no person is without their flaws and weaknesses. This girl is doing you a favor by pointing them out to you instead of not, an unusual trait for someone in the trials to become a Hunter.”

“She’s got this attitude, like she can give out hints and still come out the winner. She looks barely old enough to be done growing, much younger than Ruthy. She knows a lot about swords, was able to read my thoughts just from how I acted, and has a reputation as being a favored Hunter.”

“Does this girl have a name?”

“Yeah, Flaure Highguard.”

Gordan’s expression shifted to surprise. “You are certain?”

Another nod.

Gordan sat upright and ran fingers through his hair. “Curious... most curious.”

“What? Do you know her?”

“Not personally, no, but the Highguard name is a well respected family within Lindblum. Their name ranks among some of the richest nobility in the three nations. The family men personally lead the Nanten, knights of the noble family holdings.”

“Nobles have their own *army*?” Fedrich’s mouth gaped. “They must be richer than some cities!”

“They are, speaking on the subject. The city of Kohlingen on the Metalark shores is practically their own property now, the population living solely to tend to the cotton fields and to fish off the coast. Albeit a small population, it is solely for the Highguard’s own business.”

Fedrich shook his head. “And here I keep thinking that I’ve heard all there is to hear. To have one family own a city? That borders on madness.”

“How would it differ from the royal family of Alexandria, or the royal family of your own Burmecia?”

Fedrich arched an eyebrow. “Good point...”

“Anyway, back to topic, this girl sounds like the daughter to the Highguard family here in Lindblum. She must be the Purity Knight Flaure, current sub-commander of their forces. Her rise to leadership is something to behold, considering she is only fifteen.”

“Fifteen!?”

“Yes. According to word of mouth, she has had an innate sense of self and of her environment ever since childhood. Once she could keep herself steady on her legs with a weapon, that sixth-sense sharpened itself to an incredible combat prowess that allows her to keep up with those twice her age. She has already mastered all techniques that the Nanten are taught, and I would suppose that she is in the process of learning more. Some would dare to call her a match for the Rose of May, General Beatrix.”

“A match? General Beatrix was rumored to have slain a hundred soldiers by herself, and this girl is considered an equal to that!?”

“Perhaps that is the case, but it is all merely rumor and prone to exaggeration. In reality, she may simply be an above average fighter for a girl of her age.”

“But she was able to read my thoughts from my moves, so there must be some truth to it.” Fedrich sighed. “This isn’t sounding good at all. If she’s typical of the Hunters in the Festival, what kind of a chance do I have?”

“A decent chance, I say.” Gordan insisted, motioning with a hand. “You cannot allow mere rumor to depress your spirits and leave you without courage. If you stick to your training and focus everything on the fight, then I dare say that you will be just as good as any other warrior in the tournament.”

“Except I don’t have any techniques or skills, just knowledge on how to fight.”

“And knowledge is much more important than technique or skill! A person may be the master of the greatest sword skills in the whole world, but that alone does not guarantee victory. Knowing how to fight is just as important as knowing a method to fight.” Gordan paused a moment, taking a breath. “Take myself, for example. I have proven myself in combat many times, yet I do not owe allegiance to any technique. Gerick and Illis, Ruthy as well, all fight from the pure knowledge of how to effectively use their respective weapons. You, Fedrich, have the

same knowledge. I taught it to you personally and so did your father. Knowing a skill or technique merely adds a sharper edge to your strength, but a sharpness from knowing how to use the weapon is still there.”

“So you think I still have a chance?”

“I know that you do. You have worked hard over the past months you have been with the Regulators, and have improved greatly. If anyone stood a chance at winning, it clearly is you.”

“Well...” Fedrich paused, trying to come up with words. “Thanks for the vote of confidence. I guess... I just stopped by to know if there was anything else you could teach me.”

Gordan smiled. “As of your last lesson, you have managed to excel at all methods of practice that I know of with a short sword. The only thing I can tell you is to remember to treat your sword as an extension of your body. The more about your sword you know, the easier it will be to wield in combat.”

“Alright, I’ll remember that.” Fedrich stood, stretching his legs. “I should be going home to sleep. Thanks again for taking the time to see me.”

Gordan stepped forward to offer a hand. “As always, you are welcome here whenever you like.”

Fedrich accepted the shake. “Right.”

Fedrich’s legs fell out from under him, body collapsing onto the spartan comfort of the cot in his room. Weariness settled across his mind, muscles bunched up and knotted from the exertion of the trials. His hand managed to drag the sheets across his form before he gave up all movement to begin his slide into sleep. Morning would come all too soon.

Darkness swarmed across his vision, clearing to reveal the shadowy streets of his hometown. The looming clouds of the eternal rains stood still, pouring volumes of water than soaked his fur to the flesh within moments. Fedrich looked around in confusion, but a burst of lightning and the thrown shadow of a familiar person cleared up the problems.

My my, you seem uneasy tonight.

Fedrich chuckled, dispelling the notion. He turned around and saw the shrouded figure resting against a fountain in an intersection of streets. “For

some reason I've always tried getting in the first word, but you beat me to the punch once again.”

The figure chuckled in return. You’re in a strange mood.

“The trials for the Festival today were tough, my body and mind are exhausted. I must be easily amused when so tired.”

...Festival?

Fedrich quickly realized that the speaker had no idea what the Festival was. “The Festival of the Hunt is a competition between the strongest warriors of the continent to see who can kill the most monsters in a certain time. Today was the start for the trials to enter it, and it was a challenge for me. Tomorrow I’ll go through more trials, and the next day will be the festival itself. I’ve been training hard to prepare for it, but I still seem far behind the skills of the other warriors.”

A means to measure the rate of your improvement, it seems. You are sticking well to the few reccomendations I gave to you.

“I guess I am. Hopefully after the Festival I’ll have learned much more, be better off to fight.”

To fight, Fedrich, is one thing, but not the only one. Having a capable mind and a flexible mind is just as important as a powerful and adaptable body. When was the last time you opened a book to study from it?

Fedrich paused, then shrugged. “Not since I left home for Lindblum.”

The speaker wagged a finger and tsked. Your mind will rot if you don’t exercise it as often as your body. You ought to be appreciative of the efforts I make to teach you all this.

“Yes, mother.” Fedrich droned.

But on to more important matters, young Burman. The cloaked figure sat down on the fountain, clasping hands on its lap. What I’m to share with you tonight is the most important information you have received, possibly more than you will ever receive. It is enough to know the enemy, the Golems and their capabilities, but now you must learn how to organize a defense against them.

“I’m listening.” Fedrich leaned against a wall.

The Golems, artificial being they are, work well alone or together. As a group they bear the

advantage of having offensive and defense magic in use at the same time. Alone they would have to choose one or another. In either case, they are vulnerable to one thing, the time it takes to charge their spells. It can take anywhere from a second to several to cast spells, and when they are doing so, they cannot stop unless willing to sacrifice their spiritual strength. Moving, too, is nearly impossible while preparing the spell. The figure pointed at the demi-human. You, Fedrich, with your natural advantage in speed, can easily close the distance between a Golem and strike it dead while it prepares its magic.

However, in large enough groups, the Golems can plan the casting of spells so while another group is readying a spell, magic is already in use. This is the deadliest strategy that they can use, and always brings an end to any advance on their position.

“Why exactly is the time to cast a spell different?”

The speaker lifted a hand and pointed a finger up, making a point. *Is it easier to throw a one pound stone at a rabbit to ensure a weak but quick injury, or to throw a ten pound stone and ensure*

lethal wounds or death? Casting a spell is like picking up that rock. A light rock is easy to take, but can't deliver as much force. A heavy rock takes a lot of strength and effort, but one gathered, can be thrown for awesome damage.

“I see... I think.” Fedrich pursed his lips together, standing up to take a few meandering steps. “The stronger a spell they try to use, the more vulnerable they’ll be, right?”

A nod. Accurate to a point, yes. So you know that attacking while they are readying a spell makes for an easy kill. If you have two warriors for each Golem, the process becomes insultingly simple. One warrior lures the attention of the mage and the other strikes as it readies a spell or leaves itself open to attack. If you are both quick enough, in theory you can run through a group of several Golems and change between hook and bait repeatedly to kill them all before they ever cast a spell.

“So they are easy to distract and easy to blindside, then.” A smile lit Fedrich’s face. “That would work! It sounds like the only real thing that I can do against them. It’s all a matter of striking before they have time to cast their spells!”

As best as we can determine, this is the appropriate strategy to use against them.

“Goddess, this is wonderful. Most of the time you simply lecture me about the dangers the Golems present, but now there’s finally some good news to hear. A weakness, and all this time they sounded like perfect tools of war...”

They ARE perfect tools, Fedrich. The speaker restated, serious tone killing Fedrich’s giddy feelings. **Never let your guard down around them or think that they will be pushovers. There is a reason why we had to resort to this, you know.**

“Still, at least now I feel like I can win against them!” Fedrich spun on his heels to confront the phantom, but the cloaked person was gone. The Burman huffed, crossing his arms. “Feh... always leaving with the last word, too.” Stepping to a wall, he gave it a solid kick to logically rattle his mind free of the vision, slipping into the dark nothingness of his subconscious dreamworld.

Chapter Four

This story belongs to me and my creative mind. However, most of the characters, names, and places all belong to their respective companies, so don't yell at me for copyright infringements! *Remember, Italics represent a person's thoughts or the telling of past events.*

Enjoy...

:Faraway Dreams:

Chapter Four:

Fedrich's mouth had the consistency of wet dirt as he murmured to himself. "The sandman wasn't being kind last night."

He leaned up from the bed, muscles tense and his bruised torso still echoing the pains from yesterday. Shoving the sheets aside, he swiveled his legs out and stood up, arms limp and hair matted against his scalp. Taking a few slow steps to the dresser, fingers fumbled through his vest pockets until he procured a potion. Uncorking the small vial, he swigged the bitter liquid and rolled it around his tongue to lessen the dryness before swallowing it in a gulp.

Hopefully, he wished, the potion would ease the residual pain and let him fight today's trials at his best.

"Goddess, what time is it?" Fedrich rooted through his vest again and pulled out his pocketwatch, the hands revealing that it was a little before six 'o clock. A groan came from his throat as he replaced the timepiece. "Only an hour..."

Stripping off his sleeping shorts, he donned his working pants and tied on the wraps for his feet. Shifting his shoulders, he slid on his normal green vest and then his mythril woven vest for the added protection. Snapping on his two necklaces, tying on two more wraps to supports his wrists, then tugging his large brimmed hat over his ears completed his appearance. He picked up his sword and tied it's scabbard to his belt, then left his bedroom and went to the front room of the Hall. As normal, the Regulators were gone, probably at the gate to the city and preparing for the patrol. Luckily there was still coffee leftover in the pot, so he poured himself a cup to rouse his body from sleep.

"It feels like weeks since I've gone out, but it's only been four days..." Fedrich took a seat on one of

the thick wood chairs, slouching and sipping at the brew. “Four days, and two more to go...”

Silence answered his quiet thoughts, not that he expected a reply. A hand reached over and plucked an apple from a plate on the table, a small breakfast before he went out to a cafe and had something more filling. He took a few bites, savoring the tart flavors and the underlying sweetness. Taking only a few minutes more between the coffee and the apple, he discarded the core and set the mug near the wash basin, then left the Hall and closed the doors. Stretching again, feeling his joints give a satisfactory crack, he began jogging towards the Aircabs and to his destination at the castle courtyard.

“You feeling good this morning?” Illis yawned.

“Better’n normal since you mention it. Why?” Gerick replied, glancing back at the dark clothed woman.

“Because I’m still feeling sore from yesterday. Having to do twice the work as normal is starting to wear me out.”

“Oh?” He arched an eyebrow. “I guess your starting ’ta get rusty. You remember when it was just us ’an Gordan on the field, right? That was for almost a year and you did just fine.”

Illis harumffed. “It’s not like that was ever easy. Besides, the monsters are more powerful and numerous these days.”

“I suppose you got a point, but we’re still goin’ out.”

Illis growled, crossing her arms. Ruthy looked at her sister momentarily, then to Gerick. “Aren’t you worried?”

“Nope.” He replied with a grin. “Can’t let fear get the better of me.”

“But what if we run into trouble? Isn’t it risky to go out, just us three?”

“How? We haven’t lost a fight yet!”

“Don’t you remember? Fedrich was worried about us being outnumbered too greatly last time he was with us! Didn’t you say that the Vice’s are gathering again? What if we run into them?”

Gerick looked back again, adjusting the weight of his hammer across his shoulders. “Then we go after

'em and kill them all in one sweep."

Ruthy's face whitened. "All of them?"

"Now that it's just us, we've gotta give it everything we have. No more playing games with them, it's all or nothing."

Illis snorted. "More like win or die."

"Enough, Illis!" Gerick shouted, startling the woman. "All it's been outta your mouth is why this and why that, too hard and too much work! What in hells name happened to you? What changed you into this whiny little brat?"

Illis' eyes hardened at his accusations. "What's happened to me is that you're starting to go off on patrols with no damn sense about you! When it was the four of us we could take on enemies easy, and Fedrich made it even simpler. Now it's us three, the monsters are more dangerous than ever, and you still give us the same odds as usual. What's happened to me indeed! What happened to *you* that made you blind and stupid!?"

Gerick stopped walking, then turned to face the woman while allowing his battle hammer to slide to the earth as a support. Illis followed suit, hands on her hips and her chin tilted up in defiance. Ruthy

kept her distance, worried eyes flicking between her sister and her elder leader.

“Are you sayin’ that I’m not fit for command?” He asked, temping her into stepping over that line.

“What if I am?” She posed, shifting her weight from one leg to another. “This isn’t the military, Gerick, I’m free as the next person to say what I think.”

“I know, but insulting my methods isn’t somethin’ I’d let slide.”

“And what would you do about it?” She avoided answering the question, hoping to force the man to see her side before saying something she would regret.

Gerick remained silent a long moment. His fingers scratched his beard, good-natured smile absent and replaced with a grim expression that he constantly bore while in the Guards. He ceased stroking his facial hair, lowering his hand slightly. “I’d ask you to leave and not bother returnin’.”

“No!” Ruthy cried out, running to her sister and grabbing her shoulder. “Don’t say it, sis, don’t leave just because he said he would!”

“And why shouldn’t I?” Illis looked down at Ruthy, expression still just as harsh.

“Because... Gerick’s right, and you are, too!” She took a breath. ‘We can still go out and patrol the city wall, even if it is dangerous. We could hide in the hills if we see any group of monsters too big for us to take.’ She then looked at Gerick, the elder man’s expression unreadable. “I agree with Illis, it is a big risk if we go out with just us three. I’m tired and so is she, and I bet you’re just as sore but too prideful to admit it.”

“I’m in perfect shape to go on the patrol.” Gerick reiterated.

“Then you’ll be going alone!” Illis shot at her leader.

“Stop it!” Ruthy screamed, catching both their eyes. ‘Stop fighting!’ Collecting herself for a moment, she stood tall and stared at Gerick, meeting his eyes. “Gerick, it’s too risky to go as we are. You’ll end up patrolling alone if you go, so unless you want Illis and I to leave, then we’re going to meet with Captain Cecil and get some help with the patrol.”

Gerick, flustered, grinned weakly. “Now look, we
—”

“Are you going alone or are we going to meet with Cecil?” Ruthy repeated forcefully, giving the older man a start.

His mouth gaped, trying to work out words. After several seconds, mind racing and his eyes darting here and there, he growled and swung his hammer over his shoulders, walking back inside the city walls. Ruthy smiled, then winked at her sister as she moved to catch up with him. Illis remained still for a moment, stunned by her sister’s outburst.

She was able to make Gerick change his mind about the patrol! Damn, she did what I couldn’t do after endless attempts! Something’s changed her... she would never have done this a month ago, a week even!

Illis shook her head, then walked to follow the other two. “Gods help the person who crosses her now...”

“Warrior Karst is down!” The judge announced, motioning to the victor. “Warrior Adagio wins the

third round with a time of three minutes and fifty seconds!”

The group of warriors, much smaller since yesterday, applauded the efforts of the man as he descended and walked away, comrades slapping his back. Fedrich made a mental note to stay clear of the man’s kicks less he receive a broken leg like his opponent. Healers assisted the wounded fighter off the platform, tears running down his face. The judge shuffled through a thick collection of papers, squinting at them.

“Numbers five hundred eighty three and thirty six! Warriors Fedrich and Saturos!” He called.

Fedrich flexed his fingers, walking through the crowd around the platform and jumping up. He went to the center, seeing his opponent was a man of average stature, bearing a flail with an extra long chain. The judge stepped in, pushing them to five paces distance between each other. Satisfied, he looked between them and lifted a hand.

“Alright, engage!” He dropped his hand, scurrying back.

Fedrich stepped forward and drew his sword, but the man’s flail snapped to life and nearly hit his

head. He skipped back, Saturos spinning his flail above his head to create a solid defense from any position around him.

“Ha ha! You can’t attack without getting smashed to a pulp!” The man laughed, spinning the weapon even faster.

Fedrich growled, recalling seeing a previous bout with this man and another armed with a sword. All that Saturos did was spin his flail, striking the man as he tested the weapon and winning by default once five minutes was up. He worked purely on defense and was willing to let the clock decide the battle.

Damn... I don't know how to get past the flail and strike without getting tangled up in the chain! There's got to be some way I can cut it or attack from a distance...

“Going to stay put? Good, then hold still!”

Fedrich paled as the man adjusted the spin of the flail, seeing it arc up and come down like a falling rock off a cliff. The Burman jumped to the side, the spiked ball smashing through the wood platform. Yanking it, he started spinning it around again while holding his ground. Fedrich remained just short of the weapon, forced to a stalemate as he couldn’t risk

life or his weapon to a blind attack. Either his arm would be broke or his new sword would shatter, neither a desirable outcome.

How can I get through to him!?

...attacking while they are readying a spell...

Fedrich's expression lit up, the sudden memory of the dream offering a solution to his seemingly perfect strategy. Grinning, he lifted his arms and laughed. "Come on! You want to win? Then come and attack me instead of swinging that toy like a coward! Take a shot at me! I'll even stand still to make it easy on you!"

Saturos frowned. "No one insults me, bastard rat! Die!"

The man swung his flail up and sent it sailing for Fedrich's head. The Burman, defying expectation, ducked to his side again and dodged the head of the weapon. Clawed feet scratching into the wood for grip, he ran forward and lashed out violently with his sword. The gleaming metal stuck the chain, and to the surprise of both warriors, cut clean through it and rendered the weapon useless. Saturos stood in mute shock, even as Fedrich landed next to him and jumped up, punching his jaw and sending the man

into the sky with the force of the blow. Both landed, Fedrich on his feet and Saturos on his back, eyes rolled into his head. The judge quickly approached, and after checking his body, stood.

“Warrior Saturos has been defeated. The winner is Warrior Fedrich with a near record of one minute and ten seconds!”

The fighters remaining all applauded and cheered, rousted by the quick and decisive match. Fedrich descended to rest against the walls before leaving for another meal and a short nap. A few of the men he passed offered words of praise, slapping his shoulder or simply knocking fists together in a typical soldier’s congratulations. Close to the doors of the courtyard was Flaure, the young girl simply offering a thumb’s up that Fedrich returned along with a smile. Her battle was won in the record time of the Festival, fifty-nine seconds, and in a single move.

“So how’s Fedrich doing in the Festival?” Cecil asked.

“He won both times yesterday.” Ruthy replied quickly, smiling at his success. “Now he’s got two

more trials today, and there's no chance he can lose!"

Cecil chuckled at her enthusiasm. "You're mighty confident in him."

"He's been training for this every day. There's just no one alive that can match his determination to win."

"Best wishes to him, then." He nodded, looking off into the field. "So how're things doing on your end, Gerick?"

"Ah, if it wasn't for the Vices bein' a nuisance, then it'd be great." The man replied on a sour note. "Plus I've got both ladies here staging protests about the patrols."

"They've got a point, you know, not even I'm gusty enough to go fight monsters with only two men as backup. It's just plain foolhardy to try, better to have numbers on your side than theirs." Cecil shrugged his shoulders, waving his hands out. "It's good that you're still willing to go it outnumbered, but not everyone's got your style of running the gauntlet every day."

"Bah, you're all getting soft, I say." Gerick scoffed, increasing his pace.

Cecil smiled at his attitude, looking to the two sisters and seeing them both with the same look.

The four continued the treck through the grasses around Lindblum's walls, reeds thinning out with the summer heat but still dominant over the landscape with the surplus of water in their roots. The sun was pouring all its energy onto the land, sitting nearly at midday with only a few puffy clouds to block it's view. Airship traffic was heavier than normal, an influx of people coming to the city to witness the Festival of the Hunt. The increase in people walking the streets in gaudy clothes and asking for directions made it even more apparent.

“Hey...” Illis muttered, slowing down. “Hey...! Up ahead!”

The others stopped quickly, weapons drawn as Illis pointed to a spot close to the Lindblum walls themselves. Dark figures, small but noticeable, were moving carefully along the massive stone barrier. Ruthy took a step closer, hand over her squinting eyes. After several seconds, she lowered her hand and shook her head in worry.

“Vices?” Illis asked.

A nod of red hair. “I could only see a dozen or so.”

“There could be more, probably are.” Illis frowned. “I say we leave them be.”

Gerick snorted, starting to a jog. “Not this time, ladies, we strike and strike hard!”

“Leave ‘em be, old man!” Cecil shouted to no avail.

“Either help me or let me run to my death, you two!” He shouted back.

Illis paused, gripping her hands and growling like a feral cat before striking out to a run. “He’ll be the death of us, the bastard.”

Ruthy hesitated only a moment before pursuing her sister, and Cecil followed suit with a heavy sigh.

The four made quick time, running up hillsides and skipping down the steep slopes of valley walls. The Vices didn’t seem to notice their presence, continuing to walk alongside of the wall. Several minutes passed by, the Regulators all grouped together and waiting for the monsters to pass by.

“There’s more than a dozen.” Illis whispered to the others. “Two dozen or so...”

“Doesn’t matter now.” Gerick stood and hefted his battle hammer. “Let’s go!”

The elder man and Illis stormed down the hill towards the Vices. Cecil and Ruthy followed along the top of the hill, waiting to sweep in on the monsters to split them apart. As soon as Gerick struck the first blow with his hammer, cracking apart the skull of the wiry creature, Cecil leapt down to assist.

“Keep up top and shoot the ones with staves!” He ordered. “Those cast magic, they have to go down first!”

“Right!” Ruthy nodded, stringing an arrow to her longbow and pulling it taught.

The Vices all stopped their patrol, immediately turning back and moving to swarm across the offending humans that struck them unaware. Swords rang out as they collided with one another, hisses and bellowed curses echoing off the nearby stone walls. Arrows rained onto the monsters, one every few seconds as Ruthy tried her utmost to stay accurate and take down as many targets as possible. Cecil jumped from the last rise of the hill and let gravity take his sword through the shoulder of a Vice, downing the monster in a clean cut. A sudden

explosion of fire erupted across Gerick's position, scorching earth and flesh.

Damn! There's still more of them! Ruthy clenched her teeth, eyes trying to discern the Vices that held swords from the ones with staffs or wands. She let an arrow fly, the metal tipped projectile piercing through the chest of a Vice with a wood rod in its grip. There were nearly a dozen bodies already scattered on the field, but the redhead could see that the tides were starting to shift from their favor to that of the monsters.

"Just die!" Illis screamed, sword crashing down against the curved Vice's blade.

The creature hissed and chattered in reply to her outbursts, stabbing viciously with its sword. Illis managed to duck back, swinging again and managing to knock the blade from its grip. Rushing forward, she rammed the creature and sent it down, then ended its life with a quick stab to its neck. The warrioress then charged forward, engaging another Vice and getting a lucky shot that stripped it's fingers from the hilt of it's sword. Standing firm, she drew back and beheaded the creature as it's screeched in foreign pain and tried to pick it's sword up.

Illis suddenly found herself enveloped in an inferno, fires springing to life and ravaging her clothes, flesh, her every sense. She screamed out in agony, falling to the earth as her legs failed her. The flames died within a few seconds, but the burns and immense pain still pounded on her brain, leaving her helpless to move. Her clouded vision saw a Vice approach, sword held up and ready to finish her off. Before it could act, an arrow pierced its skull and knocked it down. Legs appeared in front of her, dark brown boots and tanned pants, holding off the remaining Vices while shouting muted words at her. Gritting her teeth, she pushed through the pain to shove herself to a sitting position, sword still one with her hand. She saw as Gerick spun his hammer wildly, letting momentum and force knock the two last Vices off their feet long enough for Cecil to finish them. Hands gripped her shoulder, and a familiar face pressed itself to hers.

“Sis!” She called, voice muted beneath the roaring in her ears. “Sis, wake up! Say something!”

The two others came to her side, talking to her in deaf tones. Ruthy, at least the person who looked like her, pressed a bottle to her lips. Illis opened her mouth and let the potion slide down her throat, the bitter liquid starting to numb the pain across her

body. The voices surrounding her started to clear up along with her vision, and she could tell that it was Ruthy tending to her injuries while Gerick and Cecil stood around.

“Sis, can’t you hear me?” The redhead asked, voice clearer, piercing through the din in her ears.

“I’m... yes, I can.” Illis replied, voice unsure.

Ruthy smiled, leaning forward to hug her sister. “Thank the Gods, you looked like death.”

“She always looks like death.” Gerick snapped in good humor.

“You, old fool...” She replied, a pained grin touching her face. “Look like a burnt piece of meat.”

“Well, it looks like it was a good thing I came along!” Cecil interrupted, finishing wiping his blade clean of blood and sheathing it. “This was hard... those damned Vices are getting tougher to work over.”

“Told you so, Gerick.” Illis added, forcing her legs to unfurl and let her stand, Ruthy assisting. She glared at her leader, the elder man covered in similar burns and bruises, and licked her cracked lips. “We can’t do this by ourselves anymore. Even with

Cecil... we still took a beating worse than ever. We can't go on like this..."

"Feh... you're probably right." Gerick huffed, taking a potion from his vest and downing it. "But that doesn't mean we stop the patrols, we just bring on some new people and take it from there."

"If that's what it takes." She shrugged off Ruthy's hands, finally sheathing her sword. Taking a moment to catch her breath, she straightened her posture and shoved her hair back behind her ears. Despite feeling raw all over, she wasn't ready to surrender to the injury. "Now let's collect the spoils."

Fedrich stretched his arms out, flexing the muscles to keep them loose and ready for his last fight, the deciding battle to see if he would become a Hunter or fail. The warriors around him were all murmuring to one another, mostly insults at the end of the current fight. The judge, with incredible patience, inspected each of the two warriors on the platform. Their fight had gone longer than five minutes, and as such, was being determined by who had delivered the most wounds to the other.

“Warrior Jamis has three notable injuries upon his body, and Warrior Lavian has four notable injuries. In accordance with the rules of the Festival, I hereby declare that Warrior Jamis is the winner of this battle! In accordance with the powers vested to me, I hereby declare that he is no longer a warrior, but a Hunter! Congratulations, Hunter Jamis Narayan, and welcome to the ranks of those worthy to take part in the Festival of the Hunt!”

The warriors offered weak applause, most of them jeering at the two for not being able to finish their duel quickly. Fedrich was surprised at the outcome, most warriors present now able to limit their duels to under two minutes. However, the two showed equal skill and ability, so a stalemate seemed all the more evident under the time limitations.

“Numbers five eighty three and seventy two, Warriors Fedrich and Flaure!” The judge called.

Fedrich’s expression widened, fear clenching his chest at the sudden declaration. He knew Flaure was among the fighters present, and although he expected to fight her somewhere down the line in the Festival, it didn’t lessen the blow. After watching the resounding battles that took place on the

platform, now it was his turn to take part, and against the strongest of warriors present.

Shake it off, it's now or never. It's time to see where I stand against the legends...

Pushing the fear back below, he walked to the platform and jumped up, seeing Flaure present and waiting for him. In her hand was a sword, long and thin, covered in decorative patterns that made it look like an item for display. The judge approached and escorted them to their starting places, then sure that they were ready, stepped back and raised his arms up.

“Warriors, engage!”

Fedrich rushed forward and lashed out with his short sword, a move that Flaure easily blocked. He knew, from studying her fights as intently as he could, that she seemed to draw out the fight to measure her opponent’s moves and plan her attack from there. Making the first strike was a means to testing both her reactions and the durability of her thin sword, being quick and strong enough to absorb a strong hit. He jumped back and waited for her to make the next move, sword up in a defensive position. The young girl started circling around the

platform, Fedrich following suit to keep her at a distance.

“Testing me, then changing to a defense. You’re expecting to lure me into this fight.” Flaure commented, an arrogant smile tugging at her lips. “A decent strategy, surely based on your observations of my fights.”

“I won’t give you the chance to measure yourself up to me and find a weakness. You’ll have to go in blind this time.”

“Blind, you say? You speak as if I haven’t studied your fights as well, seeing what strengths you lay claim to.” She lifted her sword up, shifting her body sideways to lessen her profile. “Let us see, then, which of us has the advantage.”

With a quick jump, the white clothed girl stabbed forward with her sword and forced Fedrich to duck to his side. The Burman’s short sword moved to slap her blade away, but she drew it back, forcing a miss and an opening in his defense. With equal speed as before, she stabbed ahead and pierced Fedrich’s shoulder with the tip of her sword. The Regulator growled in frustration and pain, backing off and returning to a safe distance. Flaure kept her grin,

pointing her sword at him in a simple protective stand.

“Speed, agility, both attributes that Burmecians are above standard in ranking. However, it seems you lack the basic combination of those skills, reaction.”

Fedrich remained silent, instead opting to attack directly again. His sword met her own blade, and he could feel the vibrations from the strike run along the metal. It clicked in his mind that her sword wasn’t meant for direct combat, that it’s primary goal was to deliver a killing strike unobstructed. If he could use that against her, he reasoned, then perhaps he could cause enough damage to the weapon to render it useless. Gathering his focus, he lashed out again and forced the girl to block the attack. Keeping up the offensive, he managed to force her back a step and bring concern to her expression. Her emotions broke through in anger, and Flaure had to circle around Fedrich’s body to redirect the strike from his sword and allow her to gain distance from him.

“You don’t seem all that willing to go on. Can’t manage a fight on brute strength alone?” Fedrich taunted.

Flaure's forehead creased. "Bothersome nuisance. You wish to test your theory?"

Changing her stance, she lowered her sword and held it parallel to the ground, pointed behind her. A sudden outburst of light emanated from her body, tendrils of light moving as if alive across her torso and arms. The tendrils snaked to her sword, and it gained an unearthly glow like that of the sun.

"Below the earthen clay, a martyr's vengeance! Seraph's Rage!" She chanted, swinging her sword up and pointing it to the sky.

A rumbling began where Fedrich's feet stood, and an explosion of light shot into the sky right in front of his body. He screwed his eyes closed, but the blinding light still seared his vision. His body quaked in pain, it felt as if his fur was being burnt off his skin. Seconds later the light disappeared, and Fedrich nearly fell to his knees as pain wracked his legs and chest. He tried to open his eyes, but the effort was almost unbearable to do. It dawned on him why there were rumors about her being a match for General Beatrix, who else could summon that kind of an attack so easily?

"Mock those who are your superior, do you?" Flaure spoke in a haughty tone. "You types always

believe that you have the right to say whatever you want to whomever you want. It takes measures like this to teach you where your place is. You should be thankful that I only let it graze you, a direct strike would have undoubtedly killed you.”

“You arrogant child, don’t try and force nobility into what it takes to be a warrior. Being of a noble family doesn’t make you a superior warrior!”

“Two minutes!” The judge called, interrupting their words.

“I beg to differ. Without my position, I would never have attained a skilled style and technique as I possess.”

Fedrich tried again to open his eyes, but he could only make out fuzzy shapes in a white haze. Flaure’s position was barely viewable, but he managed to force his legs to step back slightly as she moved towards him. He lifted his arm, sword nearly a part of it, and hoped to bluff her into keeping a distance long enough for his eyes to clear up. Gordan’s words from the previous day came to mind, and he forced a smile. “Knowing a technique only makes your skill sharper, but it’s still sharp to begin with. Sharp enough, I say, to beat you!”

Flaure laughed, voice light and humored. “Words, Burmecian, mere words. Come, prove them to me if you believe it to be so.”

Fedrich gritted his teeth, trying to focus his strength again and to ignore the pain. His grip on the sword felt as normal as possible, like it wasn’t even necessary to think about it. For a moment he knew that the sword was as much a part of him as his hand would be, an extension of his strength. In that one moment, something in his mind clicked. Fedrich suddenly was aware of something that he could do, some kind of attack that seemed as natural as his practice routine. His eyes, almost recovered, drifted to the stain of the dragon on his sword. The image seemed to urge him on, like it was trying to remind him about something more that it could offer instead of just being a weapon. He looked up to Flaure, the girl staying put as she observed him and waited for his attack.

What is this? What is it that I remember now? It’s like something just woke up, something that I’ve known about ever since I got this sword. Is this what he meant by blessed by dragons?

“Alright... I’ll trust it...” He whispered to himself. “I’ll do it. I’ll win this fight!”

Following the sudden ingrained actions that he came upon, he shifted his feet and brought his sword up to rest against the tip of his muzzle. A stunning display of lights shone across the sword, spiraling around his body and falling into the surface of the sword. Whipping the blade out and then forward, foreign but familiar words rushed out from his lips along with a tremendous pull at his strength.

“Goddess of purity, bring about the Reaper’s winds! Cherry Blossom Storm!”

Without warning, an ethereal spear appeared in the sky and fell to the earth at Flaure’s feet. It glowed brightly for a second, then exploded in a mighty roar. Hundreds of objects, pink and red cherry blossoms, circled around her body and exploded in turn with violent and fiery heat. Flaure, stunned at the attack, screamed out in pain as the blossoms touched her body and exploded, the heat alone singeing her exposed skin and clothes. Seconds passed by in agonizing slowness, but the display ended and the platform around her body appeared as if it was scorched by fire. Flaure herself was barely on her feet, loose clothes ruined and barely clinging to her body. The remaining warriors and the judge were all spellbound, mute to the incredible display they witnessed.

“What... in hell... did you do?” She wheezed, dropping to her hands and knees.

Fedrich, weakened by the immense strain of the attack, fell to one knee and tried to keep standing in that manner. The proper answer came as easily as knowledge of what he did. “A skill of the Dragon Knights, dragoon magic.”

Growling like a wounded animal, Flaure forces herself to a shaky stand on her legs. Her eyes glared at him, inner anger lighting them like a fire. “I don’t care... what tricks you have... or how you learned them. I will... defeat you!”

Fedrich’s own anger came to surface, and he stood up and did his best to shake off the weariness that plagued his limbs. He raised his sword up, and Flaure did the same. With almost comic slowness, the two charged one another and attacked, locking swords together in a stalemate. Fedrich summoned a final push and brought Flaure’s thin sword down, the tip hitting the platform. Moments later Flaure’s hold on her sword failed, and the weapon clattered to the ground with an echoing result. The two stared at one another, not taking in the obvious result of her loss and his victory. Seconds later, Flaure shuddered and fell to the ground, expression still taught with anger.

The judge ran onto the platform and bent down to check on her, seeing that she was only unconscious. He nodded, then stood up and lifted his arms to gather the other's eyes. "Warrior Flaure has been defeated! Warrior Fedrich wins the fourth trial with a time of three minutes and forty eight seconds!" The judge stepped to Fedrich side, taking an arm and lifting it to the sky. "In accordance with the powers vested in me, this man shall no longer be known as a warrior, but as a Hunter! Congratulations, Hunter Fedrich Castor, in joining the ranks of those worthy to participate in the Festival of the Hunt!"

Chapter Five

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Enjoy...

:Faraway Dreams:

Chapter Five:

Fedrich rubbed another palmful of potion across his chest, working the muscles to try and numb the pain that encased his body. He winced as another battle came to a painful end, one warrior sporting a broken limb after the other had literally thrown him into the air and allowed gravity to do the work. His own arm twitched in pain at the thought.

“At least I did it, after training for so long. I’m finally on my way to victory...”

“A surprise for all.”

Fedrich looked to his side, seeing Flaure taking a place on the wall next to him. Her voluminous clothing, mostly ruined by the dragoon spell, was covered in a woolen cloak to keep her modesty intact. Her appearance was still ragged, parts of her hair shriveled from the heat and her face still coated in sweat and burns. Not wanting any bad blood between them, Fedrich reached into a back pocket of his vest and drew out a high potion, offering it to the girl. She gave it a strange look, then looked at him. He nodded, and the warrioress took it carefully and downed the light blue liquid with a sigh.

“It’s not normal for opponents to treat each other’s wounds.” She commented.

“Except we’re not opponents any longer, just two people with similar problems.”

She managed a humored grin. “So it would appear.”

“What attack was that?” Fedrich asked. “I’ve never seen anyone with that kind of power before.”

She leaned her head back to rest on the stone wall. “That is the second of two techniques I’ve learned from my current master, Cyan Garamonde. He has taught me how to become a conductor for the

holy energies of heaven, how to take it and mold it to my choosing. It is through his training that I have earned my title as a Purity Knight, but I still have much to learn before I can truly accept that position.” She looked over to the Burman. “Where did you learn your attack? I have not seen such a unique strength either.”

Fedrich sighed wistfully. “I don’t know.”

“How could you not!?” Flaure interrupted, eyes wide.

“I just don’t.” He repeated, looking up to grab at words. “When we were fighting each other at the end, something in my head just... woke up, like it had always been sleeping in me. I just trusted in it, and you know what happened after that.”

“That I do.” She mused, thinking deeply. “That must be why. You yourself had no knowledge of that strength, so how could I have measured it and discovered a means to defeat it? It was the perfect weapon... unstoppable, unreadable...”

“It was the only thing I had against you that worked.”

“Not necessarily. You showed enough skill and wisdom to try and work against a pattern you saw

within my style, not many others possess that kind of thinking. You attempted to force me to adapt to your strategy instead of blindly fighting mine.”

“It was just luck, nothing else.”

“Modesty, too, is something uncommon among the warriors here.”

Fedrich felt a tinge of blush enter his face, but Flaure didn’t pick up on it. Instead, she stood up and shook her hair loose, then turned and offered a hand to her one time opponent. “You did well, Hunter Fedrich. I wish you luck in the Festival.”

“Thank you, Flaure.” He accepted the shake with an equally firm grip, noting for the first time that she was shorter than him by a good number of inches. From that perspective, she really did look like a child barely in adolescence. “We’ll both have to enter next year and test ourselves again.”

“I’ll remember that. Farewell until then.” She smiled, turning to leave the courtyard.

Fedrich watched her leave, grinning at the chance to test himself against someone of her caliber again. Subconsciously, he wondered if he would ever get the opportunity in face of the need to protect his homeland’s future.

Clawed feet rattled out a familiar tick tack pattern that gave away his approach, but for ears used to the noise and able to dull it out, Fedrich didn't pay any attention to it. The Hall was illuminated by the dulling afternoon sun, bright yellows and oranges painting it all over with long strokes of shadow. Open doors greeted him, and he stepped inside to see that everyone was present and chatting around the central table.

"Fedrich!" Ruthy was first to shout, standing to greet him. "How did it go?"

The Burman gave a thumbs up. "Done and done, I'm finally in."

"Congratulations!" She cheered, running up to give him a quick hug. "I knew that you'd get into the Festival!"

He returned the embrace with a smile. "Yep. Now tomorrow it's going to be the real test, this time to get the Master Hunter title for myself!"

The redhead went back to her chair and sat down, Fedrich doing the same. He looked over at Illis, noting a large amount of bandages underneath her

clothes and on her arms. “Something happen in the field?”

She snorted in anger. “Something like twenty Vices out to roast you alive.”

Fedrich’s eyes widened. “It’s nothing serious, is it?”

“Just burns, nothing more.”

He looked to Gerick. “Was it that bad?”

“Bad doesn’t touch it, Fedrich, yer lucky that the Festival’s got your attention. The patrol would’ve singed you bald ‘o fur.” His typical smile returned. “Lucky for us Cecil was willin’ to help, so we managed a good haul despite the beating we took.”

“Only after Ruthy had to convince you to get his help.” Illis added with a sour tone.

Fedrich looked between the woman and Gerick, then at Ruthy. She shook her head in frustration, motioning to the two with a hand. “They... we had an argument about the patrol. We ended up going to see Captain Cecil to see if he could help, and he volunteered for the job. I was only expecting some of his men, but he said he had a debt to pay back from the Fire Bandit. It was because we weren’t sure

about going on the patrol. You were worried about the Vices, and we had to go out without you, so it would've been a disaster if we ran into them without help.”

“Well, once tomorrow passes by, I’ll be back with you and ready to take them on.” Fedrich grinned.

“That’ll be good enough for ’ya, Illis?” Gerick asked of the dark clothed woman.

“Yeah.” She gave the elder man a look. “But we still need to look for someone to replace Gordan, and more still if we want it easy in the future.”

“Easy or not, this isn’t the military. We can’t go hirin’ more people ’an expect to stay afloat. They work for money, you know, it’d mean less for you and me.”

“Sometimes it feels like it would be worth the loss.”

“You two...” Ruthy started, eyeing them both. “Don’t start arguing again, it’s bad enough when we patrol.”

Illis stared at her younger sister, then stood up and smoothed her hair back. “You sound like an old maid.”

Ruthy gasped. “You take that back!”

She snickered, then turned to leave. “That’s better. I’ll see you at home.”

“G’night, Illis.” Gerick muttered after her footfalls on the cobblestone square. He picked up his hammer from the wall and set it on the table, snatching spent rags and pans of oil to start cleaning it properly.

Fedrich stood up and stretched his arms, still feeling sore and restrained pains across most of his body. He was thankful that he remembered to purchase a number of potion, else he would hardly be able to move after his duel with Flaure. “I’m going for a walk, Gerick.”

“See you around.” He replied while eyeing his weapon. “You’d better get lots of sleep tonight, so don’t be meandering ’till all hours.”

“Like I ever have.” He snickered in reply, passing through the doors of the Hall. He hadn’t stepped more than six paces before an arm gripped his shoulder, familiar amber eyes peering at his face.

“Mind some company?”

“Not at all.”

The two Regulators left the familiar surroundings of the square, entering the winding streets that span the circumference of Lindblum's walls. People passed them in rushed paces or in slow evening meanderings, most chattering with one another over the droning of the Airships. The airborne crafts themselves were darting to and fro, in a constant state of motion and never standing still long enough to appreciate the view they flew in. Clouds in the sky and the falling sun made for a picture worthy setting, bright yellows and oranges staining the heavens in pastel afterthoughts.

“So how were the trials?” Ruthy asked, breaking their silence.

“Difficult, almost more than I could take.” Fedrich mentally noted all his sore muscles at the reminder. “It was easier at first, but it wore down to the best warriors in the Festival. I barely made it out of the last trial.”

“Tough opponent?”

“Not so tough as much as smart. She seemed able to read my moves before I acted, but I won out by a lucky hit.”

“She? Your last fight was with a woman?”

“A girl, really. Strong for her age.” He looked at Ruthy and her strange expression. “You think it’s odd that women entered?”

“Kinda. You don’t find many women around that like to fight, less even that would enter a competition.”

“Well, the Festival does bring in all kinds of people.”

“True...”

The conversation wore down to silence again, Fedrich admiring the view of the city while Ruthy simply looked ahead in thought. Their walk had brought them to the more active part of the Theater District, where the looming concert halls and centers of knowledge lay. People were lined up in throngs to enter some buildings, bright banners illuminated by artificial light announcing performances by famous actors or respected musicians. Ruthy looked at the crowds with a light sigh, the masses made up solely of couples out on the town. She looked to Fedrich, the Burman lost in his own thoughts, and pursed her lips.

I know he must be tired after going through so many fights, but would he mind? She looked away,

nervousness creeping into her thoughts. *I know he'd agree just to be polite, but would he really mean it? I don't want to keep him out late if he wants to sleep, but... Oh, come on Rothy, don't be a coward! You'll only know if you ask him, so ask!*

“Fedrich, would you like to go on a date?”

“Huh?” Fedrich muttered, snapping out of his daydreaming.

“I mean, would you like to go out for dinner?” She repeated, altering some key words in a nervous fit. “A celebratory dinner for... getting into the Festival! We could go to the Blue Crow, or anywhere you like!”

“Sure, I’ll take you up on that.” He smiled warmly. “It’s been a while since I’ve had a chance to talk to someone over a good meal.”

Rothy returned the smile, trying her best to keep her nervous feelings pinned below. “Thank you.”

The Blue Crow wasn’t especially busy, but most of the tables were occupied and the workers were hastily rushing from group to group with menus or meals. The din of conversation wasn’t too powerful, but enough to mandate a little rise in speaking. It

was just crowded enough to void the sensation of relaxation from the blue atmosphere.

“So how has everyone been doing? I’ve hardly seen you in the past few days.”

“Well, we’re all doing alright. Gerick’s been acting kind of cranky about the Patrols, especially since Illis started pointing out that we need help. The number of monsters has been increasing a lot lately. Gerick says that it’s just a late start on the summer season, but it’s too sudden in my opinion.”

“You think something happened?” Fedrich commented after finishing a mouthful of greens.

“I don’t know what could’ve happened, but whatever it was got all the monsters out in force and more aggressive than ever. I mean, up until last time we went out I’ve never seen Vices in the plains, much less in large groups. Now they’re roaming right next to the walls, other monsters are stalking all around the plains and trails. It’s scary, like they’re all gathering together for some common reason.”

“They wouldn’t do that.” Fedrich pointed out. “They don’t have the brains to do that. It must be something in the wind that’s got them agitated.”

“How can you be sure?”

“I’m not, but I know they don’t work together unless it’s a life or death situation. It’s probably just a late summer season, you don’t need to worry yourself about it.”

“Because you’ll protect me, right?”

Fedrich smiled. “Exactly.”

“That’s what I like about you, Fedrich, you’re always there for me... even when the odds are against us.”

“Well, you’ve been there for me, too. Remember Reno? If you hadn’t followed me when I said not to, I might’ve died fighting Claire...”

“You protected me from Elric, even though he was so strong.” Ruthy snickered a moment. “You even saved me when we first met.”

Fedrich grinned, recalling their meeting in the rush of battle. Twice he had assisted her against the giant spiders, even before he knew who she was. A strange meeting that foreshadowed their future. “It was like a foretelling of the future. Do you even know how many times we’ve saved each other from harm on patrol?”

“Too many times to count.”

The two shared a brief chuckle, going back to eating their evening meals. They remained quiet as they ate, looking up at one another now and then to share brief signs of inner thoughts. One done, they waved in a worker and picked up the tab, paying it at the front desk. The two strode out of the restaurant, walking through even quieter streets in a near dark city. Artificial light shone down on them even as the falling sun offered enough light to paint the sky vivid purples and reds.

“Fedrich, could I ask you something?” Ruthy asked quietly.

“Sure, you don’t need my permission.”

“Are... Will you...” She struggled for words, looking to her side. “When the Festival is over... what are you going to do? Are you going to stay with the Regulators, or... are you going to go back home?”

Fedrich slowed down and eventually stopped walking, the sudden realization of that question hitting him with a stunning force. He had intended to win the Master Hunter title and to return home as a proud and victorious warrior, but now it felt

different. He had made a lot of friendships in the Regulators, earned his first actual job and a semi-permanent home that was all his own. Responsibility as a Regulator hummed in his mind, the bonds he made in Lindblum just as strong as the ones he had back home. The images of his parents, his friends and acquaintances, all swam to the surface of his mind, and the homesickness he felt when he first arrived here churned in his gut.

“Fedrich?” Her voice was meek, almost a whisper.

“I... was going to return home, but now I don’t know.” It was as honest an answer as he could think of. “I’ve made a lot of friends here, and I’ve got friends back home. I don’t know who I would miss more, and I can’t just... choose between them, they’re all important to me.”

“You’re important to us.” Ruthy looked back up to him. “To me... more than anyone else I’ve known.”

He looked at her, noting the beginnings of tears welling up in her eyes. She forced a smile, stepping to him and threading her arms around his shoulders, resting her head next to his own. His arms followed

suit as she sniffled, twin tears rolling down her cheeks to wet his fur.

“Ever since you first came, you were special in my eyes.” She continued, trying to keep her voice level. ‘The only person I could ever really talk to was my sister, everyone else was too busy or couldn’t understand. You, though, tired to help me overcome my fears and my pain. You’re the only person outside my family that I felt like I could talk to and be heard, understood. And when you talked to me, shared your pain, I felt like we shared a common bond that was more than friendship.’ She drew back enough to look to his eyes, deep green color inviting her to delve into his soul. “I didn’t understand what it was, but when I saw you broken, mind and body, in Treno that day, I... started to think that I loved you...”

That admission made Fedrich freeze, eyes wide at her words. His own feelings, the friendship he had with her and the camaraderie, the trust between friends and warriors, all shifted drastically. The signs he saw, even his own feelings towards her, suddenly made more sense. It was as if someone threw off the cloak that surrounded what she was to him, finally revealing the truth.

“Ruthy...” Her name was all he managed, everything else he thought turning to silence.

She smiled at his lack of words, leaning closer to rest her head next to his and tightening her embrace, skin pressed against silver fur. “You don’t need to say anything. Just holding me like this... is all I could ask for...”

In a moment, the last of the sun fell behind the ocean, it’s brilliance hidden from plain view but the afterglow still remaining in the sky like the haze of a fire. Lindblum continued along in it’s endless routine, unaware of the days end, striving onwards to manage the commerce of a nation. Artificial lamps flickered on as darkness settled, Airships appearing as glowbugs in the crowded interior of the city walls. People rose from sleep an others went to bed, many finishing their days last labors before heading home. Shops closed for the night, carts rolled into the streets to begin the nighttime entertainment, plays rose the curtain to the last act...

...and two people stood in the midst of it all, wishing for the moment to never end.

“

The Author Speaks!

Boy, I think I broke some new personal records with this little number. I'm not exactly the best at expressing emotional feelings, but after reading this over, I think I might have underestimated myself. A nice and sweet moment for our Burman hero before he goes into battle against men and monsters for the title of Master Hunter!

And before I forget again, I ought to clarify the identity of the Golems for **Jaysinya**'s benefit. In mythology, a golem is a creature made of clay and brought to life, serving its creator and following any order given to it. Typically, golems are never used for good, instead wielding their earthen might to kill others and to cause havoc to anything near it. In Final Fantasy IX, once or maybe twice, the black mages are referred to as golems, an appropriate title for them that I prefer to use. That ought to clear things up for you.

See you around, folks!

Chapter Six

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Enjoy...

:Faraway Dreams:

Chapter Six:

Fedrich sighed, content. He stood at the gate to the Festival of the Hunt, ready to engage the swarms of monsters being released in the main street of the Business District. Forty-eight other Hunters stood at equal readiness alongside him, bearing their weapons and threatening one another with death or curses for failure. The Regulator ran his fingers down the leather scabbard of his sword, recalling the knowledge that could summon a dragoon spell within a mere moment if necessary. He smiled as well, the wishes and praise of comrades helping to keep his courage aflame.

“Wish me luck?” He asked

Ruthy shook her head, smiling as she gave him a quick hug. “You don’t need it, everyone else will when they see what you can do.”

“Victory is going to be mine.” He chuckled, twisting his shoulders to loosen himself up for the fights ahead.

The other warriors looked just as itchy to start the fight as he was, but when a figure descended from the steps of the Aircab terminal in front of them, all noise and movement stopped. The Regent of Lindblum, Cid Fabool IX, followed by four royal guards in typical Lindblum uniform, brushed his cloak aside and lifted his arms up with a wide smile.

“Ladies and Gentleman! Hunters! I congratulate you all for achieving the distinct honor of participating in the Festival of the Hunt. This year has been marked by the incredible rise in technology and in trade with the two great nations we ally ourselves with. The people are happier now than they have been since before the bloody times of the Mist Wars.” He lowered his arm, allowing the words to sink in. “On this day, the eyes of people from all across the continent, of all cultures and of all rankings, rest upon your shoulders. I ask only this of

you, to do your absolute best in all regards, to do battle with the beasts as our ancestors did to ensure the freedom for their future generations, for us! Let not fear hold you back, but let it empower you to overcome any obstacle that hinders you!”

The Regent turned to the side, looking down the street and to where the Hunters would battle against the monsters therein. Lifting an arm up, he pointed a finger towards the sky. “The spirits of hunters long gone watch over each of you!” Thrusting his arm out to point down the street, it appeared as if the motion itself was the strike of the bells that began to ring. “Let the Festival begin!!”

Forty-nine men and women drew their weapons and charged down the street, screaming and yelling as the fervor reached its climax. They rushed by the Regent, who stood and grinned wildly as if prepared himself to go with them and take part of the coming slaughter. Immediately there was a separation between the swift footed and the cumbersome Hunters, Fedrich discovering that he held the lead with his impressive sprinting power.

It was two long minutes before the first signs of monsters appeared, overgrown Trick Sparrows and quarreling Fangs running through the main street for

a means out and to their natural homes. Jumping as high as he could, he intercepted a Trick Sparrow in mid-flight and struck a wing off, taking the bird down with him. Landing with ease, he turned around and pounced on the downed bird, sword plunging through its narrow body and killing it. He searched across it's body, growing frantic but smiling once he found a tag with a four imprinted on it along with the emblem of the Regency. The first few minutes of the half-hour long Festival and he was already up by four points, good progress in his eyes. He looked around and saw a wounded Fang leap over a Hunter, heading for him with bloody teeth promising a painful wound. Instinct controlling his movements, he drew his sword up and dodged to the side, impaling the beast as it crashed onto the cobblestone. Searching a second corpse brought him another ten points, and Fedrich was confident that he could really win the Festival.

Goddess' luck! Fourteen points in the lead, I just have to keep it up and make for the prize monster at the end of the street! Those eighty points will be mine!

Fedrich's ears caught the sound of something cutting through the air, and his nimble feet took him to his left. The sound grew louder until a roar passed

by his vision, landing and forming into a woman bearing a weapon. The woman stood quickly and lashed out, the large blade passing inches from Fedrich's chest as he skipped back from the blow. He settled into a confidant defense, wondering what she was doing coming after him.

"Who are you?" He demanded.

The woman stood up with an indignant laugh, shouldering her weapon. Fedrich immediately took notice that the weapon was an axe, but one so large that it seemed impossible for her to handle. Dressed in colorful attire that accented her buxom shape, she seemed more like a barmaid instead of a warrior.

"You are Fedrich, right?" She asked, tilting her head.

He narrowed his eyes. "What if I am?"

Her expression changed from casual humor to a deep anger. "Don't toy with an angry woman! Are you or aren't you?"

"...I am."

A second change, and her lips curled in anticipation. "Finally... I finally found you!"

“Should I know you? I wasn’t expecting to meet anyone today...”

With a heave, the woman slammed her axe on the cobblestone with a metallic ring. “I’m only the most beautiful bounty hunter in the world! Lani, mercenary extraordinare!” She laughed at her own boasts. “And you, Fedrich, are my target!”

Fedrich lowered his stance to prepare for any sudden moves. “Did someone hire you to kill me?”

Picking up the axe with a single hand, Lani swung it once. “No, I’m here to exact my revenge on you! En guard!”

With a running leap, she spun the axe around and let the momentum carry her attack through. Fedrich moved back and eventually jumped to the wind, the axe cutting into the stone with a loud crack. Taking the battle in his hands, he swung out with his sword and the blade collided loudly with the axe-head. He was surprised, the woman had picked the weapon up enough to use it as a sturdy shield. Several more times he attacked, coming in from different angles and planes of approach, only to meet the jarring surface of the axe.

“Come on, this is too easy!” Lani laughed, then spun on her heel and nearly lopped Fedrich’s arm off as he continued his offensive. Skidding still, she reversed her spin and managed to cut the Burman’s torso with a metallic ring. He cried out in pain, jumping back to a safe distance. The mercenary could tell that it was just a surface wound, protected by whatever armor was in his vest, but dealt enough pain to stun him.

“Why are you attacking me!” The demi-human asked, voice strained. “I’ve done nothing to hurt you!”

Lani scowled. “Liar! You’ve done me more harm than if you’d cut my hands off!”

“Tell me what I did, then!”

She spat, hefting the axe to a defensive hold. “Several weeks ago you pursued a friend of mine through Treno and killed her! Claire the Demon Lance? You know that name, don’t you?”

Fedrich froze in place, fearful memories rushing to his mind and instilling fear and anxiety. He stared at the mercenary woman, not recognizing her at all. It crossed him that it wouldn’t be any surprise if she had bandit friends, but to have them follow him out

to his home? Shaking his head, he shoved the unpleasant memories back. “Yes, I knew her. She was a traitor, tricked me into trusting her so she could get close to Setzer Gestahl and kill him! I chased her to Treno and brought her to justice.”

“Justice my ass!” A finger pointed at him, angry eyes staring into his own. “You slaughtered her! Covered her in wounds and then ran her through like some dog in the street! My friend, one of my few friends... and you killed her without any mercy!”

“I didn’t mean for that to happen!” Fedrich clenched a hand before him. “I was going to catch her at all costs, but not if it meant her death. Believe me, if there was any alternative, I wouldn’t have fought her at all! I don’t kill anyone if I can help it!”

“Lies! All of it!” She screeched, running forward and bringing her axe to bear. “I won’t forgive you!”

The gigantic weapon hit the cobblestone and cracked it, the blade sinking into the dirt below. Fedrich’s training took control of his movements, adjusting his sword and slapping the enemy hand with the flat of his sword. Lani reeled back with a yelp of pain, and Fedrich stepped forward and rammed her chest with his shoulder. The mercenary

woman stumbled backwards and fell, head striking the stone and drawing another cry from her lips.

“I tell the truth, even if you don’t want to believe it. If it wasn’t for a freak accident, a slip while fighting, she would still be alive and I would be dead.” He crossed his arms, careful to point his sword down. “Lani, you’re fighting isn’t going to bring her back, won’t redeem her honor. There’s no purpose to this fight.”

Lani laughed, body quaking in spasms. Slapping her palms on the stone, she picked herself up and dusted her legs off. “I know that, idiot! I already said this is for revenge, and revenge doesn’t need a reason!” She lifted one arm up and moved it through the air, finger twirling as if tracing a symbol in the air. A sparkle of lights spun around her limbs, then focused on her single finger that she pointed at the Regulator. “Drown my enemies in a hateful swell! Water!”

Immediately a huge ball of water appeared above Fedrich, and before the Burman could jump away, fell down to earth and knocked him to the ground. The ball exploded, rivulets of water soaking everything nearby, crushing his body and nearly choking him as well. Once the water parted, Fedrich

pushed himself off the ground and coughed heavily, forcing the water from his lungs. His eyes opened in time to see Lani next to him, lifting the axe up and getting a solid grip on it.

“Now you’re gonna pay!” She promised, taking the axe to its zenith and pulling it down.

Fedrich rolled out of the way from the lethal attack, barely able to avoid the sharp edge. He scrambled to his feet and leapt into the sky, sailing through the breeze and as far from Lani as his legs could carry him. Landing, he skipped a few steps then turned and faced the mercenary woman.

“Listen, I don’t have the time to fight you! We’re in the middle of the Festival, I can’t waste any more time or I won’t have a chance at winning!”

“Damn coward! Don’t you think about running from me!” She yelled, pursuing.

“If you can find me again once the Festival is done, then we can continue this!” Fedrich sheathed his sword, still tight in his hand. “Until then, goodbye!”

Looking down the street, he jumped towards the open-air market and to where the stronger monsters lay. Several more jumps gave his plenty distance

from Lani, the bandit woman hurling threats at him with all her breath. He focused back to his leaping, only to see his legs land on the back of a bright blue Mu. The furry creature squawked as Fedrich knocked it to the ground, a loud crack echoing off the buildings as its back snapped under the strain of the incoming Burman. He slipped down and fell onto the cobblestone, giving his head a knock and scraping his palms. Getting back to attention, he searched the body of the fallen Mu and drew out a six point tag. Pocketing it, he searched the area and saw a majority of the Hunters nearby, fighting the monsters present and some fighting each other for claims to a monster's tag. He looked down the street, seeing the archway at the entrance to the Fabool Marketplace. A quick look at his watch showed eight minutes since the start, leaving little time to waste.

Dammit, I've got to hurry and find that prize monster before anyone else does!

He got to his feet and started running again, passing by numerous skirmishes and hoping that everyone else was content to stay and pick away at the smaller monsters for fewer points. A dark gray Fang appeared from a side alley and snapped at Fedrich's limbs, but the Hunter was quick to jump

away from the powerful jaws. Lowering his body, he ran forward and jabbed at the wolfish creature, wounding its front leg. With several other thrusts, he dispatched the beast with little effort. He looked through its fur and mane, spotting the tag secured to its belly with another ten points to his name.

“Thirty! Gotta keep it up!”

Running again for all he could muster, he passed under the arch and saw a mighty battle taking place. Groups of Trick Sparrows were swirling around the center of the open square, diving together at Hunters and overwhelming them in sheer numbers. Several Hunters were retreating from the monsters, sporting wounds across their faces and arms from razor sharp beaks and talons. In a desperate choice, he drew out his sword and tried to focus onto the knowledge that it held, the instructions for the powerful dragoon magic it held. After seconds of intense concentration, the technique surfaced in his mind’s eye, and he lifted his blade up and held it close to begin the attack. Waving it out, he felt the pull of strength flow into the sword.

“Summon the Reaper’s winds! Cherry Blossom Storm!”

For the second time he saw the amazing work of the spell occur, pink lance striking the earth and exploding into a fiery tornado of cherry blossoms. The sparrows all cawed in terror, nearly a dozen of them falling to the earth as they were burnt into black ash. Fedrich's heart suddenly leapt in his throat.

“Ashes! The Tags!!”

He reached into his vest and pulled out the tags, seeing they were just thick paper cards with a metal loop. Panicked, he charged into the group of charred birds, looking through each body but finding only melted pools of metal by each of them. He growled and pounded the ground.

Dammit, you just had to overkill them, didn't you! You could've gotten forty more points at least, but you went for the easy out! Hell, this isn't good at all...

Suddenly his precise ears heard the flapping of many wings and the angry screeches of sparrows nearby. He stood and saw a group of them diving, and Fedrich brought his sword up and started swinging for all his worth. The birds all attacked, scratching his arms and head, jabbing at his fingers, even knocking his hat away. Once they passed,

Fedrich winced as he felt several wounds on his body, only two dead birds his reward. He stooped over and picked up the tags regardless, gaining another eight points to his total, and also recovered his hat and donned it.

“Thirty eight now. I gotta find that prize monster! Where could it be hiding?”

Fedrich looked around the square, several small streets making the right choice impossible to choose on. Worse yet, the immense strain on his body to cast the dragoon magic left his arms and legs feeling twice as heavy and sore, breathing labored. He noted one warrior charging full speed down a street, holding a fishing spear in his hands. Legs moving without prompting, he started after the man with hopes that he knew something Fedrich didn’t.

He managed to get his breathing under control by the time he entered the street the spear-wielding man had gone down. The man was at the moment using his weapon to fend off a Trick Sparrow, the bird darting around him and raking his head with its talons. Fedrich saw a Fang stalking close to the two, and he summoned a burst of speed to charged the monster. His sword gleamed in the sunlight and hacked at the wolfish monsters shoulder, a howl

racing from its maw. Another similar swing at its neck severed the spine, and the beast flopped to the ground, dead. The spearman turned to face Fedrich, his luck changed for the better as he finally knocked the birds head and brought it down.

“Ach, dammit, why’re you here?” The man scowled, gathering the tag from the bird.

“I thought you were after the prize monster. You’re Ivan, right? Previous Master Hunter?” Fedrich asked, taking his own ten point tag to tally up forty eight points.

Ivan laughed, a grating sound. “So what if I am? You’re gettin’ in my way, kiddo, so scram!”

A sudden blast of wind buffered the two warriors around, a loud caw echoing through the streets. Ivan turned and peered into the distance, grumbling to himself.

“Aw hell, that ain’t gonna be easy from the sound of ’im.” He moaned.

“What won’t?” Fedrich asked, taking deep breaths to soothe his lungs.

“Him.” He motioned with his spear to the end of an alleyway. Standing on scaly legs and surrounded

in a shroud of feathers was a massive bird, bald head bobbing up and down in confusion. In a sudden motion, it shuffled forwards into the open square and unfurled large wings, blue toned lengths stretching dozens of feet in either direction.

Fedrich sighed, equally tired. “That’s one big bird.”

“You seem keen on pointin’ out the obvious, kiddo. You sit back ’an let me take the bugger on.”

“We’ll both take him.”

“Hey, you aren’t supposed ’ta be making this a team effort, now.” He waved his arm to keep him back. “It’s one on one single combat, so you shuffle off, he’s mine.”

“No way! I’m going to win this!” Fedrich restated, hefting his sword up and steadying his feet. That’s gotta be the prize monster, and those eighty points are going to be mine!”

“Not if I have any say in it, they won’t!” Ivan took his spear and aimed at the bird. “Have at it, you buzzard!”

With a mighty throw, the spear whistled through the air and pierced the bird’s side, a loud squawk of

pain coming from its beak. The bald fisherman ran down the street, intent on getting his weapon back before the monster could recover from the shock. He gaped in surprise as Fedrich leapt above him, then swiped at the bird's wing and hacked away several layers of feathers. Now thoroughly angered, the bird flapped it's wings and sent Fedrich back with a painful bruise on his chest, hat blown away again.

"Damn your thick head, it's gonna get away!" Ivan swore as he ran past Fedrich and scrabbled to pull his spear out.

Fedrich stood and tried to attack again, but the enormous bird managed to gain enough power to stand. Raising a taloned claw, energy circled around its wings and then to the limb. The bird struck the ground with that claw, and several whirlwinds formed and rushed outwards, knocking Ivan down and sending Fedrich rolling across the stone to bruise his already battered arms and legs. Stamping forward, it flapped its wings quickly, managing to barrel over the two Hunters and attain flight. Ivan rubbed his head and growled in frustration.

"Ah, I told you 'ta leave it to me!"

"It's a competition, isn't it? So it's free reign to do what we can to get more points!" Fedrich

smirked as he recited the Festival law. “Consider it a test to see who’s got it to win!”

Ivan merely spat out some blood, feeling his jaw for further hurt. “Cocky little rat.”

Fedrich looked up and saw the large bird circling around the Fabool square, cawing angrily as it sought an escape from its prison. The Hunter wiped his blade free of the blood on its edge, then ran into the square and looked for any places he could jump to. Spying one, he jumped through the winds and onto a rooftop, then waiting patiently as the bird flew closer to him. With a near horizontal push, he propelled himself into the wind and lashed out, blade cutting through flesh and making the bird falter in its flight. Fedrich turned his body about and landed on his feet, and the bird tried even harder to get into the sky.

“Got you now...” He grinned, confidant that one final strike on that wing would ground the beast and ensure his win. From behind, his ears picked up a sharp whistling, and another long pointed spear flew through the air and caught the bird’s shoulder. Muscles torn and useless, the creature floundered to the cobblestone and cawed angrily. Fedrich began to look back, but a huge shadow struck the side of his

head, whiteness and stars exploding in his eyes. His body winced as he crumpled to the cobblestone below, sword clattering loudly.

“Feh, I suppose it is every man for ‘imself.” The voice warbled and faded in and out, but Fedrich was able to recognize Ivan’s thick tone before darkness swamped his consciousness.

Fedrich’s eyes fluttered, and he opened them slowly to the bright afternoon sunlight. The first thing he focused on was a tabby cat resting next to his head, licking its chops. It hunkered down and meowed at him, reaching out with a nervous paw to inspect the Burman.

“Got any points?” Fedrich asked it, scaring the feline away. He sighed, testing his arms and legs to see if they worked. “Figures...”

With effort, he rolled over and pushed himself to his knees, then to a wobbly stand on sore feet. He bent down to retrieve his sword, sheathing it, then walked a ways to pick up his hat and put it on for a third time. He slowly walked down the street to the Fabool market, seeing no other monsters roaming around and only Lindblum guards present. One of

said guards saw the Burman stumbling closer, and he jogged to his side.

“Sir! Are you okay?”

“I’m fine... I think...” He muttered. “What happened?”

“The Festival is over, sir, we’re just clearing out any hideaways. You look hurt, there are healers with the lieutenant.”

“It’s... over?”

“Did you get knocked out? The Festival ended ten minutes ago, you can still get your points counted if you hurry.”

That message made Fedrich wake up faster.
“Where?”

“At the Hunters Gate, the Regent is present to award the winner his prize.”

“Thanks! I gotta go!” Fedrich shouted in a rush, running back to the start of the Festival.

Oh man, what happened? I remember fighting off that massive bird, and Ivan threw a spear at it, then... nothing. Damn, what happened? Did the bird get me somehow, or was it Ivan?

Fedrich leapfrogged down the street, his legs sore and protesting the effort. He passed by the arch to the square, rushing by the stands he visited so often for snacks and by Lavilero's Inn, eventually skidding to a halt next to a battered but standing crowd of warriors. Brave citizens were also swarming the circle of Hunters, waiting for the announcement to be made.

"Hey, latecomer!" A man in official robes called, walking to the Burman. "Your points?"

Fedrich reached into his pocket, pulling out the collection of paper tags and giving them to the official. He counted them up, then slapped the Hunter's shoulder and smiled.

"Forty eight points! A decent run, lad, but not enough to win!" He walked around and looked at everyone. 'Does anyone else need to be counted? Anyone else?' After a minute of waiting, he walked back to the front of the crowd and lifted his arms. "Hunters, you did amazingly well today! Out of the hundreds of monsters we captured and release, almost all were killed in battle. The prize monster, a vicious gigan eagle from the northern lands, was among the dead! It is my pleasure to announce that the winner of this years Festival of the Hunt, with a

total of one hundred twenty four points, is none other than the esteemed Ivan Theend!"

The Hunters present applauded weakly, but the population of Lindblum present made up for their lacking with a roar of approval and thunderous clapping. Ivan walked up front and raised his arms, soaking in the publicity and laughing with pride. The official led the winner to the Regent, both of them bowing as he approached.

"Hunter Ivan, it is a pleasant surprise to see that you have again fought the odds to win this years Festival of the Hunt. In accordance with the rules of the Festival, you may ask of me a single gift to receive as reward for your skills. Speak! What is it that you desire?"

Ivan lifted his head a faction. "Your Regency, my only wish is to see my boat repaired from its dismal state of being. For too long it has been left to time, its sails are patched and the hull cracked. Without it, I cannot ply my trade as a fisherman, and to no longer traverse the open seas would be too great a pain for my heart to bear."

Regent Cid chuckled warmly. "Such a humble request for a man of your bearing, twice proven master of the hunt. Consider your wish granted!

Stand, dear fellow, and we shall retire to the royal courts and present to you the title to which you deserve!”

Ivan stood at the request of the Regent, and together with the royal escort, proceeded to the Aircab terminal to travel to the castle proper. Applause and cheers followed them all, and eventually all the citizens and Hunters dispersed from the street to return home and chatter away at the result of the Festival. Many of the warriors grouped together to raid the local taverns to drink the night away, and many children ran among them for autographs and to play mock battles. Fedrich stood still as he contemplated the results, how he came so close to winning only to stumble and fall.

“Hey! Mista’ Burmecian!” A little girl and two boys called, coming to his side and tugging at his pants while blurting questions. “Didya do good? How many monsters did you kill? Can I see your sword? Are you a knight? What’s your name?”

“Hold on, hold on now!” Fedrich tried to calm the children down to little avail. “Yes, I did get a lot of monsters today.”

“Wasn’t it scary?”

“Yes, it was very scary and very tough.” He answered with a smile.

“I’m gonna be a knight when I’m bigger!” One boy boasted, swinging an imaginary sword. “I’ll teach those monsters! Bam! Smack! Pow! They’ll never beat me!”

“That’s good... here.” Fedrich took the feather from his hat and plucked it into the boy’s messy hair. “It’s a lucky chocobo feather. If you wear it, then you’ll be able to run twice as fast!”

“Really! Cool!” The boy jumped around, then started running to see if it would work, the two others pursuing and giggling.

Fedrich smiled at the simplicity of being a child, that a simple feather was enough to amaze them. He stretched his arms to try to work them into being only partly stiff. With a depressed sigh he turned for the Aircabs, the weight of trying to win the Festival gone and replaced with the greater weight of losing.

Chapter Seven

This story belongs to me and my creative mind. However, most of the characters, names, and places all belong to their respective companies, so don't yell at me for copyright infringements! *Remember, Italics represent a person's thoughts or the telling of past events.*

Enjoy...

:Faraway Dreams:

Chapter Seven:

“You lost!?” Gerick sputtered, spilling his coffee as the mug fell to the tabletop.

“Yeah...” Fedrich repeated the statement, leaning against the doorframe.

“Well... Damn! I thought fer sure you’d be the one to come out on top!” He mused, noting the spilt drink. “I know you did your best, so I’m not blamin’ you for it. I guess that they meant it when they said that there’s always someone better’n you in the world.”

“It’s okay. I did as much as I could, no shame in that.” He walked inside and sat down in a chair, slouching against the back.

“So who won?”

“Ivan Theend. He killed the prize monster before I had a chance to.”

“Bad luck.”

“The strange thing was, just before I was going to kill it, I was hit by something and knocked out. I woke up after the Festival was over, and I barely had enough time to get my points counted. I don’t remember what happened, but I’m starting to think that Ivan was the one who did it.”

“Treacherous little merchant! Didn’t you—”

“I didn’t complain to anyone about it. Besides, how could I prove he did it? They’d simply look at me as a sore loser and ignore anything I said against him.”

“But still, you shouldn’t have just let it slide! What kind of a reputation are you tryin’ to make, letting people walk over you?”

“It wasn’t like I wanted that to happen! Besides, it’s too late to do anything about it now.”

“I would’ve brought holy hell on them.” Gerick muttered as an afterthought.

“I know, but I chose not to...”

Silence fell onto the two Regulators. Gerick stood up from his chair and went to the wash basin, taking a spare rag and wiping up the spilt coffee. He cleaned his mug off, poured another cup, then sat back down and took a deep swig of the bitter brew. Fedrich crossed his arms and let his head sag, studying the pattern of bricks on the floor. The clock near the double doors of the Hall ticked away a minute, pendulum swinging back and forth in the immortal sway of time.

“I’m thinkin’ about retiring.” Gerick spoke in a casual tone.

Fedrich shot up in his seat. “Retiring!? Why?”

“I dunno... something in me is just been feeling strange for a while. Illis is unsure if I can lead the Regulators now, and even I’m seeing some truth to it.” He sighed, rubbing his beard. “I’ve been getting more and more anxious to find monsters and to fight ‘em. I hardly ever think about the money nowadays, and that was always on my mind. Maybe she’s right,

maybe I'm getting too old to lead people into a fight
an' bring them out safe."

"That's not true! You're doing just as good as you
were when we first met!"

Gerick chuckled. "Thanks for the confidence, but
I'm not sure anymore, and that's more dangerous
than going in blind. If you can't stay sure about what
you're doing, then how can you do it right? For
seven years I've led the Regulators on patrol...
maybe its time 'ta let someone else take the reigns."

"But... this is your *dream*, isn't it? How could
you think to let someone else control it?"

"I'm not so selfish 'ta take it down with me,
Fedrich. You an' the sisters are good people, you
don't deserve 'ta be thrown out of a job because I'm
tired of it. I've been chatting with some old buddies
from the Guard, and they oughta do a good job at the
command."

"But...!"

"Now hold on a second, Fedrich! Look, you've
been a damn good man in the Regulators. You've
got as good a head on your shoulders as you've got
skills with a sword, better than I can say of most
men I've worked with. It's because I know you're a

good man that I ask you this. Would you be willing to accept command of the Regulators?"

Fedrich's body went slack at the question. Suddenly he was going to be the one leading Illis and Ruthy into battle? He would be the one to start the patrols every morning, to calculate battles and to calculate wages earned and lost, to be the leader of men who trusted him with their lives? The idea made him nervous, his fur ruffling from a chill running along his spine. Looking at Gerick, the man who he worked under for nearly five months, gave him little comfort. His perpetual smile was gone, replaced by a look that begged a favorable reply.

"Does anyone else know?"

He shook his head. "No. Macky would be the only one who suspects it, he would be able to tell right off..."

Fedrich stood up and murmured to himself, walking back and forth as if the rhythmic motions would ease his worries. He stopped and faced Gerick, swallowing deeply as he tried to speak the sentence he had planned, the hardest thing he ever had to say to anyone.

“Gerick, I... I can’t accept, because I’m planning on leaving for home tomorrow...”

The elder man made a gargled noise, standing up as well. His expression read as surprised as Fedrich’s was when the question of command was given to him. “You’re leaving? Why?”

“I was planning on going home once the Festival was over... and I’ve always held myself to that. Don’t take any insult, the night before the Festival I realized that I was just at home here as I am in Burmecia. I struggled with that knowledge. I still am. How could I value my friends at home more than my friends here? How can I choose one family over another? That’s the truth, Gerick, you and everyone else have been like family to me. But now... I have little choice in the matter, I have to return home.”

“You don’t have ‘ta do anything you don’t want. If you want to stay here, do so! I’m more than willin’ to accommodate you!”

Fedrich smiled weakly, leaning against a wall. “I know you are, and I thank you. But I have... obligations at home, more than I do in Lindblum. Knowing that... I feel it’s necessary to go home and take care of them, even if I wanted to stay here. You

have an obligation to protect the people of Lindblum from monsters, and you take that seriously and above anything else. You should understand that I must do what I must do, before anything else I want.”

Gerick’s face argued the logic, but he understood the dilemma a moment later and the pains associated with it. “I’m sorry.”

“Thanks for understanding...”

The elder Regulator sat back down, drinking his coffee. “It’s a shame, isn’t it? How lives can be ruined because of obligations ‘ta others, because we’re the type who puts others before ourselves. We’re always gettin’ the short end of the stick.”

“It’s not so bad a thing. The honor of serving others, of placing their needs above your own, certainly helps to balance the scales. A knight swears his life to the king and a priest to the church, and they lead powerful and remarkable lives. Knowing that helps to ease the pain...”

“True, true.” Gerick muttered. “When are you leaving?”

“Tomorrow morning, before dawn. Hopefully with an early start I can make to Gizamaluke’s

Grotto by sunfall, then spend one last day on the road until I reach the gates of Burmecia.”

“Have you said anything to Ruthy or Illis?”

Fedrich winced at the reminder. “No... but I will. Tonight.”

The sun had fallen, the bright afterglow barely evident in the sky as stars shone brighter from the sky between clouds traversing above. The streets were mostly abandoned, the majority of the population at home and preparing to get a deserved nights rest. The alcove he stood in, little more than an extension of the street into the open air of Lindblum, was quiet enough to provoke the Burman to talk to himself.

“How am I supposed to choose between Ruthy and the mission?” He asked the winds, getting no reply. “How am I supposed to choose between my friends and family here with those at home? I just can’t...”

He paused a moment. “Mum... dad, I miss you both so much. Galt, Weste, Eliza... I’m heartsick because I miss you and our daily antics. I miss just

lying around in my bed, getting vanilla cakes and gingersnaps from Mr. Harbur, even just lying on the grass and talking about the future.” He snickered. “You were always saying that you’d be the greatest comedian in Burmecia, Weste. You were going to be a scholar, Galt, and you, Eliza, just wanted to raise a family and live a normal and happy life. And me... I always said that I’d be like father and become a sergeant, even a Dragon Knight. Then I said I’d win the home a hero and a champion...” His voice faltered. “Some champion I am...”

Silence returned to the alcove as Fedrich simple stared over the walls of the metropolis, staring deep into the night sky. The moon had risen, the waxing shape following the trail left by the sun and coming higher into the deep blackness overhead. Broody reflections became vocal again.

“Luna, guardian spirit of the moon, seer of our pains and our dreams, guide to the ether and to heaven.” Fedrich mused over the written scriptures of Burman lore he learned in classes in his youth. Although he hadn’t liked it, the words in those thick tomes seemed so very relevant to him now. “Speak to her your sorrow, for she will wipe your tears away. On her name wish your dreams, for she will light the needed path. Dedicate to her your soul, for

she will take it away to heaven and to eternal happiness in the wafting breeze of the ether..."

Fedrich felt a sudden anger take his emotions, hands clenched on the railing at the edge of the alcove. "And what good does it do? I've been doing nothing but wishing for a solution, and I haven't found one. That's why I hated that part of class, because no matter how many times I sought wisdom from those words, they never helped my problems! Words never helped me, they only told me what to do after the fact! Now what words can help me? Can anyone find a way for me to stay with Ruthy and still save my homeland and my people from the future!? Why did it have to come to this?"

He looked up to the moonlit sky, and he gave up hope of controlling his voice. "*Why did you have to choose me!!?*"

The words echoed off the buildings nearby, then sailed into the open within Lindblum's walls and faded, and no answer came to him. Anger abated, he crumpled and sat on the cold stone and let his mind think on that dilemma. Why did the phantom have to choose him to save his people? Why did Ruthy have to fall in love with him? Why did fate force him into a situation where he couldn't avoid hurting

someone? He could never come to a decision when either choice would hurt someone. However, in the back of his mind, he knew what course of action he would take. That thought made him shiver, knowing what it would do to his friends.

“Then that’s what I’ll do...” He whimpered, almost to tears.

Illis knocked on the door before pushing it open, letting Ruthy enter first before she followed. Gerick was resting against the edge of the central table, eagerly drinking from his mug. He didn’t move to acknowledge their arrival, content to drink and stare at the floor when he wasn’t.

“Morning.” Illis announced.

“G’mornin’.” He muttered in reply.

“Fedrich’s not up yet?” Ruthy asked as she stepped over to a chair and took a seat.

Gerick paused at the question, setting his mug down and turning to face her. “What do you mean by that?”

“I meant what I said. Why?” Ruthy gave the elder man a curious look.

“He’s been gone since the break of light.” Realization struck him like a blow to the gut. “Wait, he didn’t tell you!?”

“Tell us what?”

He pounded the tabletop with a fist. “I don’t believe it! He lied and never saw you! Of all the things, guts enough to fight dragons but can’t break bad news to his closest friends?”

“Gerick, what are you talking about?” Illis demanded, motioning to herself. “What was he supposed to tell us?”

“That he was leaving the Regulators ’ta go back home!”

The statement floated in the air for a long moment, leaving a deafening silence in its wake. Both Illis and Ruthy looked shocked, but the redhead felt the impact pierce through her heart like one of her own arrows. She stood and hurriedly walked to the door to the Hall’s spare room, Fedrich’s sleeping quarters. Throwing it open, she looked inside to see a room cleaned and tucked

away properly, personal items missing. Gerick and Illis stepped next to her a moment later.

Gone was his sword that always was propped next to the window. Absent was the water canteen he kept on the top of the dresser with his hat and combs. His cot, normally a mess of sheets and pillow, was neatly made up as if no one had slept in it for weeks. However, a loop of thick cord was on top of the pillow along with a small fold of parchment. Ruthy went to the bed and picked it up, seeing it was his necklace that bore the large tooth from Gizamaluke's jaws. She unfolded the paper, and after reading the words within, proceeded to whimper and fall to her knees and cry. Illis stepped to her sister's side and patted her shoulder, taking the paper that slipped from her hands. It had short and concise writing, curved with the flair of Burmecian script, filled with the deepest of feelings.

“Ruthy. I’m sorry that I’ve caused you pain, but I had to leave. There is something at home I need to take care of, something I cannot set aside. The times I had here were the best, and the times I had with you can’t be expressed by words alone. I leave you with the memories we made together, but I will find a way back to you. With much love, Fedrich.”

In a moment of anger, she crumpled the paper and stood. She looked back to Gerick, the elder man flush with embarrassment at the scene. “Gerick, watch over her.”

“Hmm?”

She moved to leave the spare room, pausing next to him. “I’m going to bring him back.”

“Illis, wait-!” He shouted, but the woman had already passed out of earshot.

Illis stepped into the square, then took off in a sprint for the Aircabs. The streets were still dark, nightfall at its edge and the sun starting to illuminate the sky with blues and oranges. People turned as she ran by them, uncommon to see anyone so hurried at the time of the morning. Pushing aside anyone in her path, she entered an Aircab and slammed her hand against the bulkhead.

“Business street, closest to Hunter Gate.” She ordered of the pilot.

“Now miss, I’ve—”

She pounded the wall again, leaning close to glare at the worker. “Go now or it’s your life.”

He paled at the anger in her words. “O-Okay Miss! Heading for the Business District.”

The craft lurched and sped into the morning sky, making a controlled descent as it headed for the lower levels of the Lindblum walls. After a minute of steady flying, he leveled the cab off and slid into dock at the terminal the woman asked for. He opened the door and she flew out in a moment, black form disappearing down the stairs a second later. Illis didn't give her body a chance to rest, running at an even pace for the Hunter's Gate and the unending flights of stairs to the actual plains below. She looked around for any sign of the Burman, seeing none except tired merchants and travelers traveling up and down the paths. Stumbling at times, but keeping rhythm, she jumped down the stairs three at a time and cut corners whenever possible.

After a strenuous ten minutes of jarring movement, Illis nearly fell down at the bottom of the stairs. She leaned on her legs to catch her breath, sweat coating her face and making her hair stick to the back of her neck. The sun had risen up, bathing the plateau in a bright morning sun that stretched shadows long and made the ground vaporous with mist. Taking a final deep breath, she stood up and looked around the plains before her, eyeing each

traveler and seeing none that fitted Fedrich's thin appearance. A rage, burning strong from the shared pain she felt from her sister, billowed up and reached her throat in a guttural cry.

"Fedrich, you bastard!!"

Anyone near her stared in wonder at her outcry, but did not move to address her worry. The person whom she screamed for was too far gone to hear.

Chapter Eight

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Enjoy...

:Faraway Dreams:

Chapter Eight:

Fedrich hopped down from the saddle of his chocobo mount, holding the bird's reigns as it munched on grasses nearby. He stretched his arms and legs, working out the stiffness from a hard morning and afternoon of riding. Ahead of him lay the entrance to the massive system of caves that encompassed Gizamaluke's domain. The sun was at the right place in the sky to provide an eerie illumination of the mist that hung around the rocky walls. Shrugging off the unnerving thoughts, he led the bird into the grotto and to a central hall. One of the many Burman guards approached him.

“Good day to you, stranger!” The guard said in a cheery tone.

“And a blessed night for your family.” Fedrich said in customary return. “My name’s Fedrich Castor, and I’m seeking a room for a night’s rest.”

“Castor, eh? A respectable name, lad. Come! There are plenty of beds available and a warm meal if you need it.” He leaned back to another guard present. “Red-Forge! Get someone to shack up his mount and alert the cook.”

“Yessir!” The man saluted with a hand put across the opposite shoulder, then turned and entered one of the smaller halls.

“So, Castor, what brings you here tonight?”

“I’m returning home after a stay in Lindblum.” Fedrich answered while putting his sword and travel bags onto the bird. “I was going after the Master Hunter title, but couldn’t make it.”

The guard laughed politely and slapped Fedrich’s shoulder. “A worthy task, lad, worthy of a name like yours! Yer old man would be proud of you.”

“You know my father?”

“Yep. I served under him for a years stint, then transferred here two months ago when the previous Gatemaster fell outta the loop.” He gave the Burman a looking over. “So your his kid. I should’ve known, you look exactly like him! Sound like him, too, going after the big prizes and nothing less!”

“Thanks...”

“Ah, think nothing of it, lad! Lets go, the cooks probably got soup on already.”

The two Burmans walked down the main hall, entering an unmarked side door and into a modest kitchen and seating hall. Others were present, mostly other guards and a few travelers like himself, but it was otherwise empty. Fedrich and the guard, who was named Copper-Tooth, talked until the cook presented them a simple vegetable soup. They ate mostly in silence, Fedrich regaling his stories about his work with the Regulators, getting a rise from him and some other guards as he talked about fighting off the Coral Dragon. Once finished with the meal, he excused himself to the barracks so he could get his sleep. In his nightclothes, he rested on the edge of his bunk, mind trying to rationalize his choice.

I could have stayed with her... or even asked if she would come with me. But I couldn't... she has a place with her sister and everyone else, and I have mine. There's no place for her on the front lines of a war like the one coming, no way for her to stay safe. This is the only way I can keep my people safe and keep her safe as well. Once this is all over, the war is gone and everyone is safe, maybe then I can tell her how I feel...

He shook the sad thoughts from his mind, sliding under the thick wool sheets to ward off the damp air that hung in the old caverns. Although he wondered what Ruthy was doing, knowing that he was gone, eventually his conscious mind slid into the darkness of his dreams.

Satisfied?

“No.” Fedrich mumbled, leaning against the walls of his dreamworld..

Ah, stubborn pride rears its ugly head.

Fedrich scoffed. “Hardly, I just wasn’t good enough to win the Festival. Of course I’m angry, but my pride is not what’s wounded.”

True, it looks like your heart has suffered the most wounds.

That made Fedrich flinch, and the phantom chuckled. You have the look of someone who just lost his love. It's plain on your face, and in how you've been acting as of late. Upset that fate isn't being kind to you?

"Maybe, but why the concern? Normally you aren't the one to go on in idle banter about my life."

The figure chuckled. No, I guess I'm not.

A long pause.

The times are changing again. Things are no longer as simple as we'd like them to be.

"How so?"

I cannot say for certain, but somehow... something in the future is changing. Our predictions are no longer as accurate as we thought.

"What does that mean?"

Simply put, the farther away our predictions get, the harder it will be to determine what the future holds. If they keep getting worse, the future I've shown you may not be accurate at all. If any of my assessments are true, then it seems like our previous conversations with you might have been

the trigger to this chain reaction. I've spent too much time here, and it's affecting the normal results...

Fedrich let the statement drift through the streets until it was drowned out by the dim background of falling rain. Seconds passed in silence, neither the demi-human nor the cloaked figure moving from their spots in the intersection. Fedrich looked at the figure, and from his point of view, it looked as if it was staring at the blood red jewel that was constantly in its hand.

“Tell me... what are you?” He struggled for the right words. “You know things, more than anyone ought to. How can you see the future? The future is always changing, it’s never certain.”

What you say is true, to an extent. The figure hesitated, rolling the gem around. But you assume one thing, that what I’m doing is changing the future. Perspective is not a constant, what may be the future for you may be different for me. What is time to those who choose to alter it?

That statement made Fedrich curious, and he looked at the figure again as if hoping to see an answer written on his cloak. No answer was seen, no facial expressions present to discern any meaning

from. He chanced a response, one that he suspected to be true after thinking things over.

“*You’re from the future?*”

A chuckle. Quick study as of late, I see.

“Talking about time and changing it all night long helps, you know. You’re always concerned with making sure I stick to this plan of yours, and you act like it’s already happened. You know too much about the world and its future to be from anywhere else.”

I’m glad to see that you’re finally getting the drift of things now. The figure stood up from the fountain and stretched, revealing long and thin arms. ***Unfortunately, I have to go.***

“*Then I’ll see you next dream.*” Fedrich stood as well.

There will be no next dream.

That caught the Burman off guard. “What?”

Now that you know what to expect and what to do, I can do little else to prepare you for the coming battles. All that’s left to do is to let the experiment play itself out.

“But... you said that the future is changing! How can I do what you want if it does?”

It's beyond either of us to help that, you'll just have to go with what we know now and take care of the rest on the go. Be flexible, adapt, change with the times and try to foresee the future for yourself. I... have done all I can.

“So then...”

It's a final farewell for me. The phantom turned away.

“Wait!” Fedrich blurted.

The figure stopped and looked back.

Fedrich hesitated, actually feeling embarrassed about his question. “Could you...”

The figure turned to face him, and with slow motions, reached up and drew back the hood of the cloak. Black material fell aside, revealing stark blonde hair framing a face with blue eyes, angular features and a small grin. Fedrich could immediately tell it was a woman, a tall and masculine woman, but female nonetheless. Her eyes seemed to stare through him to his soul, catlike pupils making her seem all the more alien.

Nigata.

“*Hmm?*”

My name. You've always wanted to know who I am, right?

“*Yeah.*” Fedrich grinned warmly at the lady. “*But I had one more question.*”

Well, what is it?

Fedrich felt the emotional pain roar up, making his voice angrier than he wanted. “Why did you choose me?”

Because you were the one best suited to the job, Fedrich. Nigata smiled weakly, staring at the dark sky. ***People rally and scream at the uncaring workings of fate, but they are still bound to it. You were bound to this fate, Fedrich, long before you ever suspected it. Like we've said before, you are close to the important threads in this web of destiny, and alone have the power to change it.***

“*So all I can do is accept my fate and live with it?*”

Yes. She nodded, staring with her piercing eyes. ***When you come to a crossroad, you must make a choice to go one way or another and to follow it,***

even if you mourn the possibilities the other road held. To follow this road, Fedrich, will ensure that thousands of people and future thousands will live on in happiness.

“So I’ll take all this pain and suffering in their place?” Fedrich stated.

Nigata nodded weakly. It’s been said that the ultimate act of kindness is to give your life in place of another. You’ll be saving thousands the pain of the coming war, more than anyone could hope to do. That, I think, should earn you a place in history that would make anyone happy.

Fedrich nodded lightly at the words, the vast wisdom of her statements almost too deep to grasp. “I’ll do by best. I won’t let anyone else suffer while I can help it.”

Spoken like a true knight, Fedrich. Nigata lifted her hand and waved. **You’ll do fine... I know you can do it. Farewell, the Goddess’ blessing on your heart...**

“And on yours.” Fedrich replied in turn, watching as Nigata’s cloaked body faded into the darkness of the streets, and the pathways and city itself disappeared with her. The darkness that

surrounded Fedrich no longer radiated a cold feeling, but felt familiar and secure. With a content sigh, he let himself sink into the darkness of a deep sleep and gentler dreams. The pain of loss and the joy of gain, he eventually learned, are what made life truly worth living.

“Do you suppose it will be successful?” A tall, plain faced man asked.

The woman shook her head slowly, removing the helmet and sensor gloves. “Don’t know.”

“When will you?”

A glance at the massive display at the front of the operations room told everything. “Once our timeline is overtaken by the temporal change we’ve instigated, we’ll know damn well if it worked or not.”

“Do not be rash with me, Nitaga, less you forget your place.”

She was quick to fault him in return. “And don’t pull rank with me, Tyr, I’m the one who had to pick up the pieces you left behind. Your lucky that I managed to get the system aligned to my specs in so

short a time! We only had ten hours to work with, and stopping a marathon time modification is never wise.” She stood up and smoothed her rumpled jumpsuit, chuckling. “Anyway, we’ve got about three hours until the wave catches up with us. We need to bring the Temporal Distortion Field generator online and prep a bubble, now.”

“I know.” Tyr grumbled, stepping away from the control station the woman worked at. He slowly moved over to a massive series of data stations, sliding a metal key in the center console. Nigata followed suit, and he looked at the small screen to ensure the lock recognized both keys were in place. A glance at the masculine woman let him know she was ready.

“Turn... now.” He ordered.

Two keys twisted clockwise in their locks, and the screen flashed a symbol, then started running lines of code. A klaxon sounded in the massive room, and red lights flashed from the ceiling. The dozen other workers present all stopped their tasks and looked around the room, all of them bearing the same expression of curious fear. Speakers within the walls crackled with energy, and a recorded voice began to speak.

Attention! Attention! Temporal Distortion Field program initiated. Approximately one hundred fifty five minutes until Temporal Bubble formation. All non-essential personnel please evacuate the premises! Officers and technicians please assume your stations immediately! Repeat, all non-essential personnel...

“No turning back, now.” Tyr deadpanned, crossing his arms behind his head.

“There was never any chance to turn back, you know that. Messing with the timeline, altering it so greatly, we might as well consider ourselves separate of time itself.” Nigata chuckled to herself. “Once the bubble is formed, we’ll be forgotten by time, left alone in our own personal existence.”

“I know that, you do not need to remind us.” He nodded, sighing like the weight of the world pressed on him.

A door leading to the outer halls slid open with a mechanical hiss, and a tall, imposing figure stepped into the center. Everyone stood up and saluted, and the figure returned the gesture and walked to the front of the room. He craned his head up to look at the massive screen, a countdown at its center and various meters recording the activation of the field

listed at the sides. His ears twitched in response to Nigata's step towards him.

“Sir, as you can see—”

“The final action has been completed, yes.” The man interrupted, crossing his arms. “There are no problems in the current timestream, Nigata?”

“None, Sir, everything is within acceptable parameters.” She rubbed blonde hair across her scalp, looking to her personnel terminal. “According to the information, the event was changed as you predicted. It took a seven-hour marathon immersion, but all necessary modifications were completed as per your instruction. Data reports that at least several thousand Burmecians escaped and gained refuge in Lindblum’s walls after the conquest. All activities past that mark show a steady rise in their populations across the continent up to as far as the wave as progressed.”

“Sir, permission to speak openly?” Tyr asked suddenly.

Hesitation made the imposing figure pause, but he nodded approval.

“Are you sure we should be doing this?”

The figure looked back to Tyr, greenish eyes glaring. “Why shouldn’t we save them?”

“No, I did not mean that! I meant this, activating a temporal bubble so the wave passes by us and we are not overwritten? Aside from the slight possibility of avoiding a class two paradox, is it not going... will it not...”

“Won’t it leave us alone, only we few left of a time written anew?” The man chuckled a sad note, turning to face the other workers as they looked to him. “You all understood that this operation would make us strangers in a land we cannot foretell. The temporal bubble separates us from the timestream like a bubble of air in a river. Once the wave passes, it will fade out into the future and change everything except us. Where it will leave us... heaven’s know.”

“But is it right?” Tyr pressed, concern pushing his brows together. “Doing all this to the timeline, is it not it selfish of us to go on while everyone else is overwritten? Are we really willing to bear the weight of playing God?”

A long pause, and the man sighed. “It is the most selfish thing anyone could want, yes, I won’t deny it. But I want to see it, I want to see a new world where I am not the last of my kind. Try to understand...”

nothing else will satisfy me, this is the only way I can validate my existence. Even if no one believes me, at least I can know that I did ‘something’ with my life, that my life had meaning, had a purpose.”

“But this much?”

The man shook his head. “Although your moral standards make even gods feel like sinners, you know that they have no place here. This operation is just one man working to immortalize his name in history beyond mere words, even if no one will remember. It’s a greedy thing at heart, but you can agree that it’s more than that, can’t you?”

“We understand, Sir.” Nigata spoke up, hugging her arms together. “If it wasn’t for Elder Tribal’s efforts in the past, during the conflicts that took your people away... we too wouldn’t exist. I think that all of us can sympathize, know what it means to be the only thing that can save your people from the void.”

The figure nodded, and Nigata took a hesitant step forward and placed a hand onto his shoulder. “That’s why we opted to help you. We Genomes almost fell like the Burmans, and now it’s up to you to save them like our Elder Tribal did for us.” Fingers slid down his arm, smoothing gray and aged fur. “I don’t want to see such a thing happen again,

Degras Iron-Tail. You're doing so much for others that no one would dare call it selfish.”

The demi-human snorted a laugh. “Iron-Tail... a name belonging to one of the Burman’s greatest knights of lore, my ancestors. I can only hope that I live up to it’s legacy.”

Silence reigned within the center, many of the blonde workers sitting down at their terminals again and monitoring the progress of the temporal bubble. Tyr went to his station to allow Nigata some personal space with the Burman. His tail twitched as he recalled her feelings to the elder man, the kind of father-daughter relationship she held with him. He wasn’t one to understand it, or approve of it, but he knew that nothing he said would change the situation.

One hundred fifty minutes until Temporal Bubble Formation. The speakers alerted.

“It’s not too late for you, if you want to leave.” Degras reminded.

Nigata shook her head.

The Burman grinned. “Stubborn Genome hooligan.”

“Absent-minded codger.”

The two shared a quick laugh, the Burman staring into the screen. “...I hope this works.”

“You put too much effort into this for it to fail, your dream will come true.”

Degras murmured to himself, grinning weakly. “My dreams... I’ll be able to dream freely once again...”

...in the future...

“Listen up, men!” Fedrich shouted over the rush of cold mountain wind. “It’s time to take our stand and show these bastards what for!”

The hundreds of remaining grunts and common guards of the once mighty Burmecian army remained still, their self-appointed leader pacing along a rise in the sandy plains. Armored clothes clinked together over hastily sewn metal patches, scabbard slapping his side. He stopped suddenly, then faced his charges with an honest expression of fear overridden by courage and honor.

“Gizamaluke’s grotto has fallen, and the North Gate lies in ruins and flame. I won’t kid any of you with speeches of glory and honor, we’re in too deep to think so lightly of this.” He paused a moment, gathering his words. “We’re the last. All other regiments have gone on to face the monsters and fell without doing enough. Even the Dragon Knights, lords over the battlefield and bringers of swift death, have been trampled and washed away in the royal castle. Behind us stands the monument to our people, Burmecia, our homeland and capital, the proud house of King Hiryuu and his court! Ahead of us comes the demons, the golems who have yet shown any sign of stopping their march of chaos.”

The men all shifted on their feet, worry surfacing on their faces as their leader went on his speech in depressing tones. Sensing this, Fedrich raised his arms and pointed back to their hometown.

“Burmecia has stood the testament of time for a thousand years and more, under the protective rains of the mountains and the whirling sands of the basin. Now a threat has come to it, and will we be the ones to allow it to fall? Think, each of you, to your hearts most precious gifts. Family, friends, loved ones and homes, history and legacy, the entirety of our people lies within those walls! Will we be the ones to let it

fall? Even now the populace flees to the mountain villages and towards refuge in neutral cities, and will we be the ones to fail in protecting them?”

He pointed down to a middle aged Burman near the front. “You! What are you doing here? What are you fighting for, in your heart of hearts?”

“I...” He began, unsure. “I’m... I’m here to kill the bastards who took my wife and child in the Gate!”

“And you!” Fedrich pointed to another.

“For my family in the capital!”

“For the baker who makes my sweetbread in the Daines market!” Another man shouted.

“For the kids who I read to in the historical library!” An elderly one proclaimed. “And my wife, daughter, and grandson!”

“For my neighbors! My big sister and her kids!”

“My poor sons and daughters...!”

Caught in the moment, everyone else began telling their commander their reasons for fighting, not a single man saying it was for anything else but the things they cherished. Fedrich smiled warmly,

feeling the wash of pride and strength his men could summon once they focused their minds and hearts to the task. Raising his arms again, he turned to the side and glanced into the field, the misty forms of golems approaching a hundred meters close.

“Now keep it!” He commanded. ‘Keep your reasons in your mind’s eye! Today we fight not just for king and country, but for the people that make that kingdom what it is. Today we go into battle to defend the history of our people, our homeland, and everything that makes the Burman people what they are! We fight for the bakers, the children, the fallen and the living and everything we hold dear!’ Drawing out his sword and holding on high, he offered one last call to battle. “The Goddess Rei at our heels, let these bastards taste the rage of the children of the sky!!”

A battle cry roared from the hundreds of Burman warriors, all of them charging ahead to the steadily approaching waves of golems. As magic bolts began to form in their hands, the Burmans all leapt into the sky. Time slowed a moment to witness the event, and hundreds of nimble Burmans rained into the golem ranks like a rain of hail. Swords rang out as they pierced cloth and solidified mist, explosions of magic force bruised flesh and burned fur.

For the first time since their start, the flood of golems ceased moving.

The rage of fire, ice, and lightning tore across the grass and dirt, sending bodies flying into the air, friend and enemy alike. Despite the overwhelming odds, the remaining regiment attacked with a ferocity unlike anything they thought they could muster. The brilliant flash of dragoon magic from their commander roared into the ranks of mages, fiery blossoms tearing at their clothes and bodies. For a time, it seemed that the Burman's last stand was holding the flood of mages back. However, as time progressed, the violence in the basin lessened, the forms of fewer and fewer soldiers taking to the winds. Another dragoon spell was cast, a last climax to the battle as more golems roasted and fell to death. Ten minutes after the call to battle was made, the last Burman fell to the earth with an unforgiving crack of bones. The golems, content that the danger was gone, continued again their march towards the walls of Burmecia.

A cold feeling rushed along his spine, and Fedrich's conscious mind struggled out of the mires of sleep to awake. Pain soon replaced the chill, and

he felt as if all parts of his body were broken and flayed open. Slowly he reached to his armored vest and pulled out his pocketwatch. A glance at the face showed that it was broken, but still functional.

Eight...

His mind dimly registered that his battle was only a little before noon. Somehow death passed him by and let him live at least that long. He dropped the timepiece and groped at his waist, picking at a final high potion that he wasn't able to get in the heat of combat. He uncorked it with his teeth and swallowed the bitter salve, hoping it would give him some energy to move to a safer place. Leaning up, his sword almost a part of his hand, he pushed himself onto his feet and stumbled to a stand. The omnipresent rain of the basin was lightening to a sprinkle, the skies almost dark with sunfall. Off in the distance he could see the faint outline of the North Gate, walls illuminated by raging fires in the small community within.

“I’ve... got to save them...” He wheezed, voice cracked with his screams of fury. “I... must avert the disaster... so I can return to her...”

Putting one foot in front of the other, he began a slow journey towards the Gate, unable to think

clearly in the face of the slaughter surrounding him. The bodies of his comrades, his command, littered the grass like stones. Intermixed were an equal number of golems lying listless in the dirt, gold eyes forever closed. He, alone in a field of ruin, spat in death's eye and chose to go on living...

Epilogue and Author's Rants

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Enjoy...

:Faraway Dreams:

Epilogue:

“All stand for the heir to the throne, the royal Prince Puck Hirayuu!”

Everyone within the freshly constructed hall stood at attention, the main doors swinging open with the creak of hinges and old wood. Escorted by four knights, Prince Puck walked to the front of the hall and took his place in front of the throne. The Burman, just barely into adolescence and adulthood, seemed out of place at the foot of the King's seat. However the people felt of him, he was the crown prince, and as such was in line to inherit the throne.

The four knights stood to his left, spears held at attention.

“My people, my friends, it has been a long road to recovery for our kingdom.” Puck began, voice wavering but filled with juvenile strength. “From beginnings that seemed to spell the doom of our nation to the reclamation of what was rightfully ours, the trials we have faced number too great for anyone to count. The King... my father, has been gone for nearly a year, but I shall take up the responsibility of following his wishes, to lead Burmecia into the bright future that approaches. We have come to and end of one road, a path that was filled with grief and remembrance, and now we have come to another. Now the time for mourning is over, and we must look ahead. Now is the time to rebuild our homes, to clear the streets of rubble, to repair that which was damaged, to fix all that was broken in the hectic times behind us.”

Puck stopped his speech, taking a brief second to catch his breath. The dozens of Burmans present all were waiting, faces locked in thought and reflection. A light cough signaled another start. “First, however, I would like to honor those who protected us during the crisis, to the stalwart defenders of our

nation. Please rise, Lady Freya Crescent, Sir Fratley Iron-Tail.”

From the middle of the gathering, two people stood up and walked to the center isle. In opposition to the formal attire that everyone else wore, these two both wore their armor and travel clothing, one of red and yellow, the other in brown and green. Together they approached to the throne and knelt down before the prince. Prince Puck reached for the hilt of a sword at his belt and drew it, the blade almost too long for him to completely draw. He faced Freya first, laying the sword on her right shoulder.

“Lady Crescent, you have served the royal throne for several years as a soldier and an equal number of years as a faithful Dragon Knight. Your actions, told from your colleagues and from my own eyes, reflected none other than the true desires of any knight. You fought against the foes that plagued our kingdom, even worked with the Cleyra faction despite the misgivings they held against us. Under your guiding hands, the Burmecian people saw a spark of hope for the reuniting of our two separate people. For these actions there is a response, and it is thus:” He lifted the sword and then placed it on her left shoulder. “I hereby name you as a sister to the

Royal Family, and as such, shall be recognized as a noble line from this time on!"

The men and women present all applauded at the gift of nobility, many chattering among themselves until Prince Puck moved to stand before Fratley Iron-Tail.

"Sir Iron-Tail, there is little that needs to be said of your deeds. Your service to the family is long and illustrious, and despite the tragedies that marked your life, it has not been forgotten. Your memory had gone when I found you long ago, but the loyalty you possessed for my father stayed with you and drew you back home. Your aid at Cleyra saved the lives of many Burmans as well as the Cleyran spiritual leaders. You, without any reason aside from the innate loyalty to your people, came to our aid and fought without concern for your own life. You taught me the meaning of true service and dedication, friend, and for these actions, there is a response. You, too, shall be named a brother to the Royal Family and be recognized as a noble line from this time on!"

The applause from the gathering was louder, the service and stories of Fratley more prevalent than that of the lady knight. Some of the crowd even

cheered as he stood with an air of immense pride and joy. The two knights stood and faced the crowds, bowing with respect and then moving to stand at Puck's right hand side. The applause died, and the Prince took a moment to gather his voice and words.

“A final person remains to be honored. Please step forward, Mr. Fedrich Castor.”

A third Burman stood from the rear of the gathering, walking to the front of the room and kneeling before the Prince. He appeared in the parade uniform of the Burmecian Guard, a pair of green pants with yellow leggings, a button down jacket of a brighter green and lined with blues and yellows. Lastly was a simple metal headband, a feather on one side trying to play the part of a helmet's winged decoration. He knelt before the young king to be as he lay the sword on his right shoulder.

“Mr. Castor, yours is truly a story of remarkable bravery and courage. From simple beginnings with the dreams of his father, you entered the Guard and quickly entered favor with the men you served with. It was your bravery during the crisis that led the remnants of our proud soldiers against the tide of

mages, and while the battle ended in defeat, it allowed for the escape of our people from the walls of Burmecia to hide in the mountains until the danger passed. Yours was not a victory against those who would oppress us, but a victory for the people of Burmecia so that they might live through the hard times and come home to start their lives again. You took the pain meant for us, and that is a great sacrifice. For such actions there is a response: You, Fedrich Castor, shall be given a honorary position as a Dragon Knight, and from this day onward be known as Sir Fedrich Castor!"

Applause broke out again, subdued from the previous bouts, but enough to show respect for the man who helped save his people from death. He, too, took a place at Prince Puck's right hand side, nearly at a faint to be standing in the presence of two legendary Knights. The prince sheathed his blade with some effort, then raised his arms up to encompass the hall.

"My people, we are at the beginning of a new road and a new history. Let us work to make it a beautiful one, you and I together, that shall ring through history as the greatest times of our kingdom!"

Cheering and applause rang through the hall and into the half-built corridors outside, many of the carpenters and masons pausing to look to the hall and wonder what the occasion was. The formal tension broke away and the people began talking with one another, many going to speak with the Prince. Both Freya and Fratley stood amidst a swarm of admirers, answering questions with smiles and hearty laughs. For Fedrich, however, came a feeling like he didn't truly belong in the middle of so many important people. He went to the wall of the massive room and picked up a mug of cider that was arranged for the guests, sipping quietly.

"Hey." A voice drew his eyes, seeing that it was Freya Crescent addressing him. "You seem a little nervous."

"L-Lady Freya!" Fedrich blurted. "It's an honor to speak with you!"

"Please, you don't need to be formal." She sighed, picking up a mug and taking a long swig. "I'm sick of it, I just wanted to talk with the so called 'zephyr master'."

"Oh?" He arched an eyebrow. "Is that what they call me now? At first they called me the king of the

skies. It's too weird for me, I guess they just don't remember what my real name is."

She snickered. "Maybe so, but you're quite the hero in the streets. Last time I was there, everyone in North Gate was cheering your name."

Fedrich blushed. "I just did what I had to. I couldn't let those golems get into Burmecia without a fight."

She nudged his shoulder playfully. "Doing that we want is sometimes the hardest thing to do. I'll see you around, *Sir Castor*."

He nodded, being pushed back as others clamored for drinks. "Right. Farewell 'till next!"

Fedrich backed away from the tables of drink, walking to the empty spaces in the walkways of the royal hall. A few people came up to greet him and to offer congratulations and well wishes, but otherwise left him be. He wiggled his fingers into the slim pockets on his uniform and pulled out his pocketwatch, seeing that it was later than he thought.

Can't keep her waiting.

Closing it with a click, he put the empty mug down on a table by the massive double doors and

left the hall, walking through the empty corridor. He passed under an arched entryway, stepping onto a large circular platform that overlooked the entire mountain valley that Burmecia sat in. The rain was coming down in moderate force, just enough to make it a nuisance to those unused to it. At the far end of the platform stood a human figure ignoring the stereotype and staring up at the dark clouds.

“Admiring the weather?” He asked as he approached.

“It’s got a different feel from rain back home. This feels... gentle, protective.” She looked back.

Fedrich stepped next to her and wrapped his arm around her shoulders casually. “Don’t get any ideas, though, I’ll be the one protecting you.”

“Jealous?” She smirked, leaning into his chest.

“Absolutely. I’ll insist you come inside and suffer the festivities with me.” He joked, nuzzling her red hair.

Ruthy turned around in his hold and returned the embrace. “First let me disprove your accusations.” And with that, leaned forward and kissed him. The rain no longer held her interest as much.

THE END

The Author Rants:

And now! Right now! The exact moment you read that final word, it ended! The story came to a close! The climax falls, the line of action goes dead, there's no chance of revival, doctor, it's all finally and absolutely over! Cut! Finale! The End!

I couldn't be happier and sadder than I am right now, seeing an end to my great work. All three story arcs and one hundred thousand plus words that came together in a span of eighteen months, of many early morning thinking sessions and constant revision and planning, all tied to a close. It's like the end of an epic movie, the immense high of emotions just runs onward, drifting away into the distance. That bittersweet taste you get when you type in those last six letters.

Damn, it's been a journey, hasn't it?

I suppose there's little else to talk about, I just feel the need to let loose some of my thoughts now that I'm finally done with this. I feel a monologue coming on, lets rope that into the history of this fair tale.

I remember when I first came up with the idea for this story. After playing through Final Fantasy IX twice, I was fascinated with the amount of variety the game provided for players to look at. Large cities, so many different people like the hippos, rats, black mages, dwarves, and others. Also the little extra bits of information, like historical dates and statues, old structures and the aged look of the major cities. It was a world that just screamed out for a history, like a child demanding chocolate after his first little taste. So history, I could work with that, about the characters I liked the most, the Burmecians. They get the short stick so badly, I felt like giving them some time in the limelight, of when they were as important as the other two nations.

So I had that in mind, writing about the Burmecians as a strong warrior culture. I envisioned something akin to Dragon Knights slaying beasts in the name of the King, but I felt the need for something a bit more intimate. You can only see the surface of what armies experience in a war, but with one person, you can go layers and layers deep. So I chose a name, Fedrich. With that done, I sent Fedrich on a mission, to win the Festival of the Hunt, a natural and seemingly obvious goal for a combat oriented culture. Enter Lindblum's

overwhelming introduction, then the Regulators who played a role that I determined to be absolutely necessary to a large city in monster infested lands. After a few chapters of warming up the set, I sensed that we needed a villain to pit our heroes against. So I made a villain who offered a double whammy.

Thus we welcomed in Elric, fire bandit with a temper, and sibling to some main characters. I had fun with him, a man with a mission and sarcasm unrivaled with strength to back it. I had originally hoped to keep him as an ongoing rival to Fedrich, but I knew that doing so would weaken the storyline, lessen the future problems. So upon that note, we disposed of him in a fierce duel and let the heroes take a breather. Of course, you can only work on character interaction for so long before you need a radical shift, so we summoned in our beloved queen of torture and arrogance, Claire.

Ah Claire, she was fun to create, even more fun to write, because in the situations involving her, I could be cruel as hell and it worked. Faking alliances, murdering relatives to main characters, being a rebel without a cause other than money, she was a perfect example of a power-wielding bandit. Having Fedrich pour over her polar opposite lifestyle was a good flex of broody and sullen skills,

although I think I overdid some of it. Fedrich killing her accidentally was the only way I could see an out for his quest. I had made her out to be too powerful for him or anyone else to take on easily, and a one-on-one duel gave her the advantage, so chalk up his win to a little nudge from his lucky stars.

Then came the Festival, and boy was it a workout for my mind to try and keep the fights interesting and unrepellentive. Bringing in a slew of new warriors was fun, doing my best to keep them as minor characters while shining enough light on them to make them feel real and complete. Flaure made for a good temporary rival, reading Fedrich so easily but being helpless to stop him in the end. The Festival itself was a trying effort, so many consecutive fights with monsters and other Hunters, then to end it in such an ignoble manner followed by Fedrich leaving for home. I considered that a written means to leading someone by the nose and then slapping it off, who'd expect it? At least in the end we saw our two favorite heroes together at last.

Also the visions, that was the single thing I hated about the story. At first I wanted Fedrich to interact with the game's characters and in the game story. Later on I became too attached to my own storyline that I left the visions behind, and I knew that

somehow I'd have to tie that loose string up. It took until the end of the second arc to work that out, and I'm thankful that it worked as well as it did. A bit out of place, but I tried my best and hopefully wrapped it up nice and neat for everyone.

Romance. I like it in small doses, but writing it is my greatest challenge. People were clamoring for Fedrich and Ruthy to come to conclusions and fall into deep, bottomless-seen-only-in-movies kinda love. I had considered this, but chose against it at first. I had intended their romance to be more like the desire for the forbidden fruit, not a passion for the opposite sex. People fall in love from physical attraction as much as personality. Without the physical aspect for Fedrich and Ruthy to have, it was based almost wholly upon their personalities. I'd hoped that the tension from those complications would add another level to them as a person, make them dynamic and real. However, once I got to the end, I really couldn't find a legitimate reason for them to stay apart. Fedrich only left because he wanted to keep Ruthy safe from the coming war despite his feelings, and Ruthy only wanted to be at his side, be with her first love. With those kinds of passions driving them, how could've I made it seemed real for them to give up hope? So that's how

it ended, the two of them together again after being apart, bound by love across all distances.

Alright, I've had enough of listening to myself talking! Time to break out the cake and party streamers, step up to the mike and give a shout out to everyone!

Robshi! From start to end, there you were. Kudos for your praise and pointers, it's been a trip!

J. L. Dexter, an honor to have your ladyship's kind words! We'll have to meet at Tortuga for a celebratory drink.

Jaysina, fanatic of a fan! Who couldn't help but do their best with someone like you rooting them on?

Breeze of Summoners, Tereterhomdark, Lady-Artist, Drake Crimson, General Beatrix, and all the rest of you! I surrender the floor, offer a toast, give a thumbs up and a slap on the back for taking the time to read all this! I do my best to please my readers, and I hope that I did all that and then some. Without readers and fellow writers like you, there'd be no inspiration to create, and a world without authors and authors-in-training would be a horrible place to live in! It may be the end of this story, but there will

always be more stories to come. The history of endless worlds and infinite heroes await to be told!

The pen is mightier than the sword, they say.

Let's keep it that way.

Peace!

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